POISONED BREAD

translations from

Modern Marathi Dalit Literature

edited by Arjun Dangle

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Silenced for centuries by caste prejudice and social oppression, the Dalits of Maharashtra (formerly called 'untouchables') have only in the last forty years found a powerful voice in Marathi literature. The revolutionary social movement launched by their leader Dr Ambedkar was paralleled by a wave of writing that exploded in poetry, prose fiction and autobiography of a raw vigour, maturity, depth and richness of content, and shocking in its exposition of the bitterness of their experience. One is rolled, too, by the quality of writing by a group denied access for long ages to any literary tradition.

This important collection is the first anthology of Dalit literature. The writers — more than eighty of them — presented here in English translations are nearly all of the most prominent figures in Marathi Dalit literature, who have contributed to this unique literary phenomenon.

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Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to write an introduction to this anthology of Dalit literature, because I have been an active participant in all the movements concerning the Dalits — literary as well as social, cultural and political. I have witnessed the ups and downs in each of these movements in the last two decades. I am proud to be one of the voices raised on behalf of millions of exploited Dalits.

Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality.

There are numerous theories about the origin of Dalit literature. Buddha (6th century BC), Chokhamela (14th century AD), Mahatma Phule (1828-90) and Prof. S.M. Mate (1886-1957) are variously held to be its originators. But these theories are too far-fetched. Although it is true that these great men were deeply concerned about the plight of the untouchables, history shows that it was Dr Ambedkar who was the pioneer of Dalit literature.

It is no coincidence that the Dalit literary movement began in Maharashtra, the birthplace of Dr Ambedkar's movement. His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness.

The term 'Dalit literature' can be traced to the first Dalit literary conference in 1958, which passed a resolution defining the term. However, this conference went almost unnoticed, thus proving beyond doubt that the Dalit class was indeed neglected.

The sixties saw many new things happening in Marathi literature. For the first time a poet — Narayan Surve — wrote about the problems of workers. The Little Magazine movement also took root and flourished in this decade. Marathi literature made its acquaintance with the Angry Young Man.

In Dalit literature, Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat were

already established but the movement gained great momentum from the short stories of Baburao Bagul. His collection of stories, *Jevha Mee Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had Concealed my Caste) made such waves in the Marathi literary world that some critics hailed it as the epic of the Dalits while others compared it to the jazz music of the Blacks. Bagul's stories taught Dalit writers to give creative shape to their experiences and feelings.

In the seventies, thinking Dalit critics began to theorize on Dalit literature and its role. A number of young writers, full of a new awareness, had started writing for periodicals like *Asmitadarsha*. The poets Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Tryambak Sapkale, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, Umakant Randhir and J.V. Pawar and short story writers Tarachandra Khandekar, Yogiraj Waghmare, Avinash Dolas, Yogendra Meshram and Bhimrao Shirvale are a few who developed during this period. For, on the one hand, Dr Ambedkar's vision of a Republican Party of India — which would represent his political ideology — did not materialize. And, on the other hand, the party by the name, which did exist, was fragmented and thus rendered ineffectual.

But Dalit writers began to realize more and more that there was no point in merely writing provocative poetry against injustice. The Dalit writers had also become familiar with the Black movement and literature in the USA. The result was that the youths Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V. Pawar took the initiative and established the political movement called the Dalit Panthers in Bombay in 1972. The leaders of the Dalit Panthers were all writers. Thus a wave of writing describing experience in provocative language swept Marathi literature. This was probably the first time in India that creative writers became politically active, and formed an organization.

Dalit literature is not simply literature. Although today, most Dalit writers have forgotten its origins, Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change. It is a consciousness of these beginnings that has guided me in the selection of the poems, short stories, autobiographical extracts, essays and speeches included in this anthology.

At the very first glance, it will be strongly evident that there is no established critical theory or point of view behind them; instead, there is new thinking and a new point of view. On reading the essays in the collection it will be seen that even if Dalit and non-Dalit writers have acknowledged the different nature of Dalit literature and justified it,

there is a minute but very sharp distinction between their two ways of thinking. The agressiveness seen in the writing of Dr M.N. Wankhade or Baburao Bagul is not to be seen in that of Prof. R.G. Jadhav or Sharatchandra Muktibodh. Bagul and Wankhade make an extremely frank analysis of society, religion and literature and throw down a revolutionary gauntlet; Muktibodh and Prof. Jadhav demonstrate that even while rebelling, one must not lose sight of artistic awareness. Critical essays have been included which give a clear idea of the theoretical base of Dalit literature, and the issues that can arise out of it. Dr Janardan Waghmare's essay has been included to throw light on the similarity between the Black movement and literature and the Dalit movement and its literature. All the essayists have achieved recognition in Marathi society and literary criticism, and are linked to the progressive movement.

All the stories and autobiographical extracts in this anthology have been selected because they forcefully convey the 'differentness' of Dalit literature. How deep a chasm there is between the prose of mainstream Marathi literature and that of Dalit literature! We immediately recognize that the language, experiences and heroes of Dalit literature are totally different. In selecting stories, the quality of writing has been the main criterion. Another has been the aim of showing the material and psychological situation of the Dalits living in urban slums, those living in rural areas, and those who have risen to the middle class through special facilities for their caste. The heroes of these stories are shown struggling for survival at their different levels. They are shown confronting limitation, abject poverty, misery and brutality. In the stories 'Gold from the Grave', 'Mother' and 'Livelihood' is depicted fierce battle for life in an urban slum, and a world surviving beyond the pale of so-called 'cultural values'. 'The Poisoned Bread', 'The Cull', 'The Refugee', 'Explosion' and 'The Storeyed House' demonstrate the position of the Dalits in rural society, and their fight for existence. 'The Storeyed House' gives a glimpse of how Dalits wishing to live honourably and with respect, on terms of equality, are persecuted by higher castes. If this story shows attitudes of caste superiority, then 'Promotion' reveals the ambivalent crisis of identity in the Dalit middle class.

The Dalit autobiography is a literary form marked by a great quantity of writing; however, its quality is equal to its quantity. The journey from Shankarrao Kharat's *Taral Antaral* (represented in this anthology by 'The Boneseller' and 'A Corpse in the Well') to the

young writer Sharankumar Limbale's 'The Bastard' is the whole saga of Dalit social history. *Taral Antaral* is a narration dating from the first generation of the Ambedkarite movement. Many references to that movement are included in it.

In an autobiography like *Athvaninche Pakshi* (from which 'This Too shall Pass' has been selected), we can see the wounded psyche of a young boy from a backward area such as Marathwada; and in *Baluta* ('Son, Eat your Fill' and 'We are Kings!' are the extracts selected) the life-story of a young man from the village who has been brought to an urban slum in the quest for employment. In *Gabal* ('The Stragglers' is the extract selected) we get a comprehensive idea of a traditional occupation that has to be resorted to in the absence of any means of making an honest living, and the treadmill of Dalit existence in the present cultural, economic and social system is vividly conveyed.

Dalit women have participated actively in the Dalit movement. Many autobiographies by Dalit women have been published. Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* (the extract here is 'Naja goes to school — and Doesn't') and Kumud Pawde's *Antasphot* (extract here: 'The Story of my Sanskrit') are representative of these. Shantabai Kamble's is a struggle for identity and growth against a rural background while that of Prof. Pawde is set in an urban, educated ethos.

In *The Bastard*, a severe jolt is given to values concerning relations between men and women, and the family structure.

In these autobiographies, relating to different periods of time and set in different levels of society, we see varying facets of the Dalit movement; the struggle for survival; the emotional universe of a Dalit's life; the man-woman relationship; an existence crushed under the wheels of village life; the experiencing of humiliation and atrocities; at times, abject submission, at other times, rebellion.

Dalit poetry is a flourishing form in Dalit literature. The entire universe of Dalit feeling seems to have descended into poetic form. Innumerable aspects of individual as well as social experience reveal themselves. Although it is not possible to write about each individual poem, if one decides to evaluate Dalit poetry in brief, one can say that Dalit poetry is the impassioned voice of the third generation of the Ambedkarite movement. It can be seen standing up against subjugation, humiliation and atrocities; can be heard singing, intoxicated, of the dawn of a new life.

There are hundreds of poets writing at present. Many poems are

expressions of uncontrolled aggressiveness and breast-beating. Such poems have been consciously excluded, and only those poems selected which convey fundamental values and whose authors have been consistently excellent. Although none of the poets is represented by more than one poem, and hence the selection does not reveal each poet's full range, there is no doubt at all that it does display the entire character of Dalit poetry.

I must thank all those who helped me in the preparation of this anthology. I am also grateful to all the writers and their publishers for their co-operation.

ARJUN DANGLE

Poetry

Poetry

L. S. ROKADE

To be or Not to be Born

Mother, you used to tell me
when I was born
your labour was very long.
The reason, mother,
the reason for your long labour:
I, still in your womb, was wondering
Do I want to be born —
Do I want to be born at all
in this land?
Where all paths raced horizonwards
but to me were barred
All of you lay, eyes fixed on the sky
then shut them, saying
calmly, yes,
the sky has a prop, a prop!
Your body covered
with generations of dire poverty
Your head pillowed
on constant need
You slept at night
and in the day you writhed
with empty fists tied to your breast!
Here you are not supposed to say
that every human being comes
from the union of man and woman
Here, nobody dare
broaden the beaten track.
You ran round and round yourself
exclaiming YES, of course
the earth is round, is round.
Mother, this is your land
flowing with water

Rivers break their banks
Lakes brim over
And you, one of the human race
must shed blood
struggle and strike
for a palmful of water.
I spit on this great civilization
Is this land yours, mother,
because you were born here?
Is it mine
because I was born to you?
Must I call this great land mine
love it
sing its glory?
Sorry, mother, but truth to tell
I must confess I wondered
Should I be born
Should I be born into this land?

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

TRYAMBAK SAPKALE

That Single Arm

I was looking through a book of pictures
My small son Raja came, looked through them too.
In one picture a rich man
was beating a poor one.
Raja asked, 'Why is that man beating the other?'
Because he's rich.
As I turned the page...
There again was the rich man,
weapon in right hand,
about to kill the poor man.
My son looked at this.
He said, 'Father, wait a moment.'
He hurried to the table and took out
a razor blade from a drawer.
Once back, he sliced off
the attacker's arm from the shoulder.
Then looked at me triumphantly.
I said, there are people to help him.
No, they cannot attack him,
for the vision of that single arm
will remain before them.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

DAMODAR MORE

Poetry Reading

As I was reading out a poem
the audience was listening as I read
And as the audience was listening to me
I was reading the faces of the audience.

As I continued to read …
There came a moment — who knows why —
when a couple of them wrinkled their noses
And astonished, I said to the poet in me
'What's the reason for this?'
And he answered me,
'It was to be expected …
All that's h⌐ppened is
the settled sludge has been stirred
and the water's grown cloudy.'

As I was reading out a poem
the audience was listening as I read
And as the audience was listening to me
I was reading the faces of the audience.

As I continued to read …
There came a moment when
a couple got up and left
But the eyelids of the others
seemed ready to shed rain
And, distressed, I said to the poet in me,
'Why is this happening?'
And he answered me,

'It's only natural
All that's happened is
the moisture pent up till today
is looking to break out.'

As I was reading out a poem
the audience was listening as I read
And as the audience was listening to me
I was reading the faces of the audience.

As I continued to read ...
There came a moment when
I saw embers flaring in the pupils of their eyes
And, frightened, I said to the poet in me,
'What's this that's happening?'
And he answered me,
'It was this I was waiting for
All that's happening is
the dynamite fuses, nearly burnt out,
are trying to flare up again.'

As I was reading out a poem
the audience was listening as I read
And as the audience was listening to me
I was reading the faces of the audience.

As I continued to read ...
There came a moment when
I saw a dazzling brilliance in their eyes
And, curious, I said to the poet in me,
'Why is this happening?'
And he answered me,
'It's inevitable.
All that's happening is
they're marching in battle
on this fearful darkness.'

As I was reading out a poem
the audience was listening as I read
And as the audience was listening to me
I was reading the faces of the audience.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

BHIMSEN DETHE

Song

As father carried stones upon his head,
the headman, twirling his moustaches, used to say, 'Hey Kisnya'
let's have a first-rate *lavni*!'
and my father would sing with his tattooed throat:
In his song
there was the moon, and the sun,
and flowers blossoming, sea-waves,
an impassioned girl drunk with love ...

Sweat-stained hands clapped;
there was applause all round.
My father was touched, was filled with gratitude.
Walking home he groped towards the song of bread
that he never could sing.

Translated by Vilas Sarang

WAMAN KARDAK

Send My Boy to School

Send my boy to school
Lord and Master
I tell you
Send my boy to school

We may be terribly poor
Famine may knock at our door
I'll see that he gets to school
Send my boy to school, etc.

If the leg of your garment is rent
I promise to patch and mend
For my garment, my needle's the tool
Send my boy to school, etc.

If my clothes are torn, what do I care?
My boy must never go bare
What use do I have for a jewel?
Send my boy to school, etc.

He's got something from society; in return
My boy is going to learn
He'll be a lawyer; nobody's fool
Send my boy to school, etc.

My boy won't stay stupid or worse
Like that poet Waman's bad verse
My oath on you if there's no school!
Send my boy to school, etc.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

KESHAV MESHRAM

In Our Colony

In our colony
the postman gets bamboozled
teachings get confused
civilization stumbles
The sun — even he is darkened.
Our houses stand
like footprints of cattle in the mud.
In the midst of it all is a soul
eager to swim along the current.

Our colony —
a roaring, foaming, riotous sea
of black bodies and black hair,
wearing away in the moulds of tradition
sinking in the soil

The people of this place —
carrying the loads of soft cotton on their shoulders,
their hands rough but weak,
the bangles jingling with the crooked sky
the kids perspiring all over in sweltering heat.
Some working on the open trucks
their veins swollen — eyes half-closed

Our colony — drowned in the pegs of 'country' wine
subsisting on the hot chillied pieces of meat —
floating in the spicy, hot gravy
living half-fed despite working full hours
Yet surveying closely in the mellow light of
the candle the future of each coming new day.
Our colony gets stirred on hearing the footsteps
of the postman.

The postman —
he is simply harassed
in deciphering the name and address
scribbled out illegibly in purple
got by dipping the tip of the copying pencil in saliva
The postman frustrated in searching Ranu Narayan
surrounded by naked guides
groaning in agony as though hit on the knee
he keeps on wandering mutely in search of Ranu Narayan
bending and moving through mud and marsh
sweating in the clumsy livery.
The search is over.
'Ranu's granny has expired.'
The colony grapples with the message
like an eagle pouncing upon its prey.

In our colony —
Reforms get confused
paths are bruised, schemes stumble
now — only now have boys started learning.
They write poems — stories — Indian literature
The axes of words fall upon the trees of tradition,
the warm, experienced hailstones
of strange realities rain
on the dreams of literature
Once again begin
the rounds of the police and the postman
Darkness is sizzling swallowing the sun
In our colony the postman is
bamboozled — even now.

Translated by V.G. Nand

PRAKASH KHARAT

The Sky with its Eyes Closed

Like an artist missing originality
the sky has lost its vision.
Eyes closed
it wouldn't acknowledge
a light blue complexion,
the sudden rainbow
or a stray eagle,
the rising
and setting of the sun.

The sky does not burst into torrential monsoon rains.
The sky does not give birth to a flaming thunderbolt.
The sky cannot support its own expansion.
The sky — who has put it in the coffin?
The sky — who wrapped it in the shroud of white clouds?

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

ARJUN KAMBLE

Yesterday They have Announced

We were busy smelling the flowers of paradise;
They came and they buried our feet in the ground;
They stole the scent of flowers
and built mansions.

When it rained
they sucked up the clear water;
On our buried feet
rose yet another layer of fresh earth.

In that very earth they grew flowers
of various kinds, of various hues,
making various experiments;
And, while plucking flowers,
snicked our feet too,
knowingly, unknowingly.

Then they dabbed the same colours
upon the flowers;
With the same flowers they decked their chariots;
With the same flowers they celebrated their wars.

No rains came for a while;
the chariot too was in jail;
there were at least no shrouds then.
Then they were released:
Their leader
dug up our tomb with a plough;
Afterwards they settled down
to raise a crop of cactus.

Yesterday they have announced
that they will weed out the cactus;
Yesterday they have announced
that they will free our feet;
Yesterday they have announced
that they will give us a few mouthfuls of water.

Translated by Vilas Sarang

YASHWANT MANOHAR

An Ultimatum

See this row of sunsets in the cracks of my eyes
Tell me how to live if at each moment one dies,
In this decisive darkness I seek for words, brother
like one enclosed in a forest of flames forever I smother
And what if I raise a piteous cry
in this well-appointed cemetery
Or rage against this settlement
of leafless cannibal trees
On these accursed lips summer fires arise, brother
set aflame by stormy winds
And each vein is alight with lamps of deadly venom
Tell me what seas would cool this burn
Or tell me how to live as I die at each moment's turn.

The day attacks, a terrorist in the land of my brain
And nights never cease, the soul is aflame
Serried ranks of bone confront me at every step;
They surround me, laughing hideously,
  throughout my generations.
Tell me what place of rest this barred breast can earn
Or tell me how to live as I die at each moment's turn.

The sky here owns not a spot
that would afford a shade
to my beheaded breaths
The roads look strange, brother,
and so is the air
The rains do not let me
break into a moonlight clear
What kinships should I dwell on for a moment
as I draw a covering of ocean over me

I feel a foreigner among the people
Bearing the burden of such a bastard life
Steaming lava has dashed against my lips
O tell me what answer I should return
Or tell me how to live as I die at each moment's turn.

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

PRALHAD CHENDWANKAR

My Father

That my dreams too
may sprout new leaves,
the bright-green succulent money-creeper
toddle into my house too
like the tender rays of the sun,
my father spent his life
carrying heavy sacks on his neck,
turned from young to old.
Stroking my long lean body
my father used to say:
if you study a little
you'll be a sahib, sit on a chair,
you'll earn a little
instead of chopping wood for Brahmins
till you faint,
you will at least
read your own letters.

My son,
the teacher we had
was a bloody bastard
He'd make us sit
outside the school,
teach us not a thing,
yet, beat us till we peed.

That's what my father was like,
telling me old stories,
and if I played truant
he'd beat me as he'd beat cattle.

Once when I was
in the fourth standard,
my father visited me at school.
He wore a somewhat soiled dhoti,
a close-necked longcloth shirt,
a wrestler's pink silky turban.
The teacher's tight-lipped face
remained motionless
like the neat letters on the blackboard.

Go on teaching, sir;
how is my son doing?
I've skipped a day's work
to find out.

When my father said that,
the children in the class
suffered an earthquake tremor,
and the teacher
popped into his mouth
the chalk in his hand,
crunching it like betel-nut.
The children nearly died laughing.

My father, giving
one packet of *jalebis* to the teacher
and one to me,
escaped from the class.
All the children, including me,
and all of us, including the teacher,
fell on the *jalebis*.

That's how, eating *jalebis*,
I studied each year,
As soon as I had matriculated,
my father
sacrificed a goat to Nagamal.

The first male child in the family
seemed OK in the head.
So, selling to the Marwari
the silver bangle
won in wrestling,
my father
pushed me through college.
At the same time,
adding expense to expense,
he mortgaged the farm
and got me
married.

In four years I just about
managed to scrape through B. Com.,
became father of ti ree
plus a pair of twins,
that is, five children.
And again my father
sacrificed a goat to Nagamal.

Education leads to money,
money solves problems.
The dream-creeper
bears flowers of reality.
So, my father, on retiring,
entrusted Bombay to me
and returned to the village.

A spacious house and garden,
with an upper storey spick and span.
A new well, full of water
streaming out, serpent-like
in all directions.
Cattle, goats, sheep,
bullock-cart with bells tinkling,
sugar-cane and turmeric in the fields
to dazzle the eyes of Nagewadi.
That's how my father lived,
a new bloom was in his eyes.

'My son is highly educated,'
he kept saying to one and all.

The fields swayed,
keeping my father company,
growing bright green
according to my father's wishes.

My father got tired
of waiting for money orders,
Gazing at the wretched fields
he had grown thin as a stick.

Letters from the village
kept coming to me,
the naivety of their words
made my heart bleed.

The Bombay season
was no longer for *jalebis*.
Even sacrificing a goat
was impossible on a clerk's pay.
My father left the village,
returning to Bombay.

Seeing the city maddened
by rising prices,
he was baffled.
He dashed his broad wrist
repeatedly against the wall.
When he saw its strength was gone
he collapsed on the spot.

On the hospital bed he squirmed and twisted:
'I'll work in the new godown,'
he blabbered in delirium.
With the help of the oxygen-tube
he digested his sorrows,
allowing his dreams
to spill from his eyes,

And then, at last,
came such a hiccup,
he stared at me, his eyes wide open,
split the sky and disappeared.

Soiled dhoti,
close-necked long-cloth shirt,
a wresler's pink silky turban.

From the village now
he sends me no letters,
the fields do not laugh
and sway to my father's wishes.

Translated by Shanta Gokhale and Nissim Ezekiel

VAHARU SONAWANE

In the Lush Green Jungle

In the lush green jungle
those tattered huts
like scattered teak leaves.

In that wild wood, wild people
eating roots and bulbs
But...
No bulbs. No roots.
All vanished long before
into the hollow stomach
of a fearsome hunger.

In the green jungle
naked children
playing games
of primitive communism
and slavery
in the mud before their huts.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

JYOTI LANJEWAR

Caves

Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves
in the rock of my heart
I must tread this forest with wary steps
eyes fixed on the changing times
The tables have turned now
Protests spark
now here
now there.
I have been silent all these days
listening to the voice of right and wrong
But now I will fan the flames
for human rights.
How did we ever get to this place
this land which was never mother to us?
Which never gave us even
the life of cats and dogs?
I hold their unpardonable sins as witness
and turn, here and now,
a rebel.

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

NARENDRA PATIL

Exhalation

'Merely an exhalation'
Circumstances
have slapped down a suit
on the burning thoughts
in my mind!
They've put all burning minds
in custody.
Incarcerated
all gardens of dreams.
But how long can this bird
remain in this dungeon
whose very walls tremble
with his every exhalation?

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

VILAS RASHINKAR

No Entry for the New Sun

With determination they set
the stamp of approval
on their own garrulous tongue
so it becomes easy
to collect a hundred tongues
and spit on the sun.
They prop up crumbled bastions
in ten places
with the twigs of history
They unwrap the scriptures
from their protective covers
and insist —
'These are commandments
engraved on stone.'
From pitch-black tunnels
they gather ashes
floating on jet-black water
and reconstruct the skeletons
of their ancestors,
singing hymns
of their thoughts
worn to shreds.
There is no entry here
for the new sun.
This is the empire
of ancestor-worship,
of blackened castoffs,
of darkness.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

SUDHAKAR S. GAIKWAD

The Unfed Begging Bowl

Where does the wounded darkness come from
And man is shaped from pits dug out
This dejected life, a sorrowful cemetery
But the traveller did say to her
'Do not beg with the heart of your femininity;
anyhow you will have to prepare yourself for copulation.
Can't you see the stars are unfaithful and so is the light
    of street-lamps?
The unfed begging bowl did retrace its way
weeping down the alley.
But will it ever return now
the hawker's cart, selling cheap bread and curry?
She stopped in her tracks and suddenly
the station came upon her —
— a *paan*-shop with its cigarette counter...
Gaudy handkerchiefs laughed
slung around the throat.
A red-light habitation of way-laid colours.
From the waiting room the traveller made a caustic remark
'So you had to come finally, hadn't you?'
At this time through the troupe of harlots
a *murli* wandered collecting *jogva*.

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

D.S. DUDHALKAR

Wall

I recently took a contract
to demolish the walls of buildings.
It's not only buildings
that have walls;
villages do, too.
And we've heard of world wars
fought for the walls of nations.
For the time being, I'm just demolishing walls.
I don't know how many generations have gone by
But these walls
built by the grandpas
of that time
are really tough.
Did they need to be so hardened
to protect human beings?
Many people on many occasions
raised their hands against them
For some, their hands
became bloodied.
While the flags of others
succeeded in fluttering.
Just the other day
reading history
I realized my eyes
had been entombed in walls.
And my organs of sense
lay mutely by those walls
like motionless refugees.
On enquiring, I found out
the walls themselves
had drugged them with opium
Maybe that's why I see

even today,
machinations in walls.
What does one say to these people
engrossed in politely hiding
that they're slaves of the age!
I myself
should break down these walls
and become
a compass to them.
That's why, with a special purpose,
I've taken this job:
It won't be finished right away
But I too don't wish
to finish right away.
Once I've smashed these walls —
new houses will take birth
Spacious and lovely.
Only those who can endure
space wide enough to gallop in
should live — or else
they're welcome to die.
I'll offer a memorial prayer,
and be done with it.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

ASHOK CHAKRAVARTI

Harvest

The harvest of manslaughter is ceaselessly obtained here.
Seasons change only in accordance with the wind's direction.
From east to west, north to south
harvesting never ends, round the year,
for vultures.
Their slimy insistence on confining words into lines
with literal exactitude,
Their fondling of rainbow corpses of words
smeared with the rouge of dying sunsets —
Let them fool around and flirt,
declaim insane eccentricities,
beat their breasts, conspire intrigues of unrest
We will turn the tables on them!

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

BHAGWAN SAWAI

Tathagata:
Two Poems

One

Then the primordial man within me exclaimed:
I will lay a stone on my chest
and carve on it
images of my sorrow
songs of pain
that bear witness to my wounds
and welcome tomorrow's sun.
Tathagata
I've come to you
my sorrows interred in my bones
bringing my darkness within the radius of your light
Take me within your fold, away from this darkness
Out there, I've worn myself out, slogging in their carnival
losing my self-identity.
Tathagata
Ask no questions, questions are alien to me,
  I do not know myself
Out there, there was nothing but darkness and rocky muteness
So transmigrate into me from that picture
in flesh and blood, into my effusive being.

Two

Then the primordial man within me wept bitterly
seeing the tattered sails of his own floating ship
in the eyes of Tathagata
Then
the storm within him surged
from the sea's being, peaks of blood standing high
Tathagata
Do not leave me shoreless
Do not leave me on the shores
Because
This ocean is dear to me
My lifeblood mingled in every wave
Tathagata
I do not want you in your yogic postures as in the pictures
before whom I could place my offerings of flowers and prayers
Pardon the slaves of fetishism
who created idols in your name and festivals.

Translated by Radha Iyer

HIRA BANSODE

Yashodhara

O Yashodhara!
You are like a dream of sharp pain,
life-long sorrow.
I don't have the audacity to look at you.
We were brightened by Buddha's light,
but you absorbed the dark
until your life was mottled blue and black,
a fragmented life, burned out,
O Yashodhara!

The tender sky comes to you for refuge
seeing your shining but fruitless life.
and the pained stars shed tears.
My heart breaks,
seeing your matchless beauty,
separated from your love,
dimming like twilight.
Listening to your silent sighs,
I feel the promise of heavenly happiness is hollow.

Tell me one thing, Yashodhara, how did you
contain the raging storm in your small hands?
Just the idea of your life shakes the earth
and sends the screaming waves
dashing against the shore.
You would have remembered
while your life slipped by
that last kiss of Siddharth's final farewell,
those tender lips.
But weren't you aware, dear,
of the heart-melting fire
and the fearful awakening power

of that kiss?
Lightning fell, and you didn't know it.
He was moving towards a great splendour,
far from the place you lay …
He went, he conquered, he shone.
While you listened to the songs of his triumph
your womanliness must have wept.
You who lost husband and son
must have felt uprooted
like the tender banana plant.
But history doesn't talk about
the great story of your sacrifice.
If Siddharth had gone through
the charade of *samadhi*
a great epic would have been written about you!
You would have become famous in purana and palm-leaf
like Sita and Savitri.
O Yashodhara!

I am ashamed of the injustice.
You are not to be found
in a single Buddhist *vihara*.
Were you really of no account?
But wait — don't suffer so.
I have seen your beautiful face.
You are between the closed eyelids of Siddhartha.
Yashu, just you.

Translated by Jayant Karve and Philip Engblom

SURESH KADAM

To Dear Aana

The sunset does not bury our sorrows,
nor does sunrise bring new hopes.
Everything continues, relentlessly.
Society, bound by her rituals of ages,
chews up chunks of human flesh
in blind fury:
the horse she rides
bleeds and foams at the mouth;
she holds the reins
of an ancient system;
her predator's ears
listen for the twittering of birds;
in the orthodoxy of her world
passion and intensity are ridiculed.
Therefore, dear Aana,
you ought not to have cherished expectations
of a lingering kiss in the long night.

Translated by Vilas Sarang

UTTAM KOLGAOKAR

His House

He was born here,
but didn't belong here;
didn't strut about
dressed in flashy clothes,
wearing his hair long.
When the people here
were busy building
taller and taller houses,
he sat alone in the woods
beneath a tree
speaking softly
to the sea in his heart.
When he entered the town
taking notice of none,
the people eyed him,
whispered amongst themselves
and laughed like glass cracking.
His house, made of earth,
looked so puny
amongst the town buildings!
He went inside
and shut himself up.
Then he saw
that the rear wall of his house
had vanished
and the whole sky
with its thousand eyes
had invaded the house.

Translated by Vilas Sarang

DHARMARAJ NIMSARKAR

Experiment

Such experiments are bound to recur
time and again, of picking suns
from the dead blackness of blood
and painting days
on the canvas of darkness
I'm available always, all the time
My protests are wordless
and complaints have no voice —
Darkness of the night
knows no direction
The seed of moss sown into my flesh
never blooms. At times
the skin grows thorns
which prick me.
Darkness of the eyes
breaks into flowers of flame
and I alone am reduced to ashes.
What a journey this which shifts
my crematorium from day to day.
There is no room for my dwelling
Claims of love resound all around
and hands weary of acclaim shall rest
only when my bowels are plucked out
and spread.
I should be all set
for such an experiment.

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

WAMAN NIMBALKAR

Mother

Daylight would die. Darkness would reign.
We at our hut's door. No single light inside.
Lights burning in houses around.
Kitchen-fires too. *Bhakris* beaten out.
Vegetables, gruels cooked.
In our nostrils, the smell of food. In our stomachs, darkness.
From our eyes, welling up, streams of tears.
Slicing darkness, a shadow heavily draws near.
On her head, a burden. Her legs a-totter.
Thin, dark of body … my mother.
All day she combs the forest for firewood.
We await her return.
When she brings no firewood to sell we go to bed hungry.
One day something happens. How we don't know.
Mother comes home leg bandaged, bleeding.
A large black snake bit her, say two women.
He raised his hood. He struck her. He slithered away.
Mother fell to the ground.
We try charms. We try spells. The medicine man comes.
The day ends. So does her life.
We burst into grief. Our grief melts into air.
Mother is gone. We, her brood, thrown to the winds.
Even now my eyes search for mother. My sadness grows.
When I see a thin woman with firewood on her head,
I go and buy all her firewood.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

BAPURAO JAGTAP

This Country is Broken

This country is broken into a thousand pieces;
its cities, its religion, its castes,
its people, and even the minds of the people
— all are broken, fragmented.
In this country, each day burns
scorching each moment of our lives.
We bear it all, and stand solid as hills
in this our life
that we do not accept.
Brother, our screams are only an attempt
to write the chronicle of this country
— this naked country
with its heartless religion.
The people here rejoice in their black laws
and deny that we were ever born.
Let us go to some country, brother,
where, while you live, you will have
a roof above your head,
and where, when you die, there will at least be
a cemetery to receive you.

Translated by Vilas Sarang

B.S. HATE

The Stains of Blood

Today, if you pause here in the middle of the twentieth century,
you will observe the wounds
that have festered and bled for centuries:
They are stains
that you have admired volubly as historically inevitable.
Fields with ripening crops, orchards bursting with fruit,
emerald green meadows, chimneys of cloth mills,
factories producing a thousand delights, machines in the mines,
skyscrapers peeping into space:
capital towns and mansions where,
on the spacious terraces, the seats of power are set out in a row,
with no end to the traffic of their occupants:
As you set off all this opulence, don't forget to observe
the footprints of each generation lashed by the wind and the rain,
burnt in the sun.
One after the other, all are ground in the mill;
All tread along the river of time
with no change in their condition — with their hands empty:
The thorn of each sorrow they have endured
fastens into the heart of each great man;
On the bank of the river of opulence
you may observe, beneath the footprints,
the stains of blood.

Translated by Vilas Sarang

ARJUN DANGLE

I will Belong to It

That one should, at masturbating age,
sit twisting rope instead
And at the age of eternal gazing
upon a moonlike face
wander the town wearing down soles
At playing-with-grandchildren age
let disease play upon one's self.
Is this my life?
There, outside the village,
it is my blood that rots
Here in this lean-to I
am the city edition of that same blood.
To whom can I tell this?
To the soil here?
The soil which has not allowed
the footprint of my existence
to make its mark upon her yet?
To the sun and moon here
who wrench away the rays that fall upon my home?
To whom… to whom… shall I tell?
In this land of fifty-eight crores
this is how I must continue to live.
Who will listen to whose agony
in this density of people?
I want a life
that has the vital sap
I want a soil
that, smeared on the brow,
will bring tears to the eyes
I want a sun and a moon
who will with their rays lasso me to them and caress

I don't want mere crowds, mere land
I want for it a name whose meaning
may engrave itself upon my heart,
and gently blow upon my endless pain.
It will belong to me and I belong to it.

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

J. V. PAWAR

Birds in Prison

Shouting slogans to condemn or uphold
a blaze of fire marches forth
And forest fires take birth
in oceans which seek to oppose.
What obstacle shall now withhold
our turning volcanic vein by vein
digging trenches
every inch of the terrain?
What fear does imprisonment pose?
Life itself was suffering
conceived as a prison …
Yet it did have some advantage
It was possible to dynamite
the prison at its base.
How many jails, how many barracks…
It's impossible to count them
The oceans are stormy
Impossible to try and bind them!
Birds have drunk deep
of winds of equality
Oh, do not enslave them!
They'll soar aloft
bearing your prison along.
Do not underrate them.

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

NAMDEO DHASAL

Hunger

Hunger
Unable to do this one thing and able
to solve or not solve theorems
Will hunger-fires forge a poem?
Will music die in the fire of hunger?
How difficult music is
to him who cannot count the beat of his own pulse.
Who hadn't thought that fees could be claimed
for singing songs of hunger.
Hunger
A fruitless thing
However hard you work
the reward is still stones
If stones cannot build a house
we'll not manage to live in it.
Hunger you are mouse, cat, lion in turn
How long can mere mortals like us stand
in this game that you've set up?

2.

Hunger
A shrewd peace is growing everywhere
This is the beginning of our new life sentence
Hunger forgive us that we cannot cut the tree of time
But even cut, the sky will still be blue.
To which market can we carry dumb hearts?
Where auction them
Where day sweeps life
Who will buy crushed hearts
Who will profit by the deal?

Hunger, tell us your game, your strategy
If we can muster guts enough
we'll fight you to the finish
Can't crawl and grovel on our stomachs
too long with you
How much can we wash the grime off hunger?
How much wash the dust off years?
How much scorn to the very ends of scorn?
Hunger, if a bridge of iron will not join you to us
then let us fly free like unfettered birds
Hunger, your land, the thorns upon your land,
fester in the brain all night
till the brain itself freezes.
Hunger, when a thing is taken from the fridge
is it still fresh?
Hunger your every blood drop is cold
Your every blood drop is mute
Order, let lightning course through the guts
Order, let life get charged
Wounded seas and the long moan of our demands
Hunger, say yes to our dreams
Don't snuff out the orphan huts upon the shore
We'll see later
the gold-threaded struggle
between the snail of pain
and the sea.

3.

Hunger
We have made our demand
Let you need us
Will we never grow?
Let us grow
The sun may blithely have forgotten dawn
The river may blithely have forgotten time
We wanted more from light
than mere life
But light turned false

Hunger
We will not allow a column of cloud to stand,
indifferent, at our door
How much more can we thank
Pain
The music in pain
If we have not made ourselves a tidy life
what right do we have to quarrel with the flowers?
How much can we excite pain
How much can we burn
How much can we catch the fire that burns forever?
If our words find no expression
in this stream of sun
we'll salute you like defeated soldiers
Whoever said that every soldier in the army
fights like a man?

4.

Hunger
There's not a single grain in our house today
Not a single clever brain in our house today
Hunger
If one sings till the last light of the innermost being
will it turn off hunger-light?
Hunger if one takes care of you now
will it darken?
Hunger, your style is your own
No other calamity comes our way
but you.
Hunger, if we cannot mate you
cannot impregnate you
our tribe will have to kill itself
Hunger we have all the aces
Why talk of the songs of the half-sexed jacks?
Here's our manhood before you now.
Let's see who wins this round
You or we.

5.

Hunger
Which came first, seed or tree?
Hunger you make things too difficult
Hunger just tell us what breed this monkey is
And if you can't
Then we will screw
Seventeen generations of you
Hunger, you and your mother...

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

B. RANGARAO

On a Desolate Night like This

On a desolate night like this
when sleep quarrels with my eyes,
then sits apart sulking in corners,
in the skull beneath my hair
thoughts embed sharp claws
in the convolutions of my brain.
In the handful of light
loaned by the flickering lamp
I gleam unobstructed
Or else I too would be here invisible
like Ralph Ellison's invisible man.
Trying to shake off my heritage of want
I'm drawn unconsciously to the gods,
the ones my mother nurtured
in their wall-niches.
And those fraudulent gods stand smiling
like politicians come to gather votes.
And then my night begins to smoulder
red-hot like burning coals,
and like a doting father released from prison,
there is sunrise in my eyes.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

BABAN CHAHANDE

Labour Pains

The pangs of pain which the clouds bear
subside in a moment when they shed.
They wander here and there,
like a bunch of novices
copulating with the winds.
But the mother in throes,
her woes all over the sky,
dimly remembers the time before she conceived.
Through lanes and alleys she tramples
the bulge in her belly,
to calm her intense hunger
with a mere handful.
When labour begins, her head holds a load,
and her eyes, a shadow of anxiety for food.
Under burning skies and a hot, breathless wind
rise the infant's first cries,
Saying: world, now I see you for myself.
Thus she delivers, and her hands
set fiercely to work again.
Like the clouds, whose pangs
take just a moment to subside.

Translated by Kumar Ketkar and Priya Adarkar

PRAKASHCHANDRA KARANDIKAR

Amen

Cast: His lordly lordship
His virtuous wife her ladyship
two plump, sugar-dipped doughnuts
within a red triangle
Like an ad for Infant Food
The set: A living room, small and handsome
A settee stage up
A divan stage centre
with a foam rubber mattress
A show-case in the corner
chock-a-block with knick-knacks
All like still tombstones in a cemetery.
A plumage of plastic flowers in a pot
An aroma of saffron-flavoured semolina in the air
A television set
that declares
nothing is too expensive for pleasure
A teapoy in the centre
laid with a fresh newspaper
(saleable later to the old-paper man
a rupee-and-a-half a kilo)
Earthquake in Guatemala, disaster in Chasnala
Thousands dead. A hundred and fifty beggars arrested
Inhuman rape on Harijan woman
Jobless youth, depressed, commits suicide
Children sold off
for subsistence.
And much, much more. Sundry. Trivial.
On the wall hangs Lord Ganesh
remover of obstacles
A cold-eyed legacy
of one's own bread-and-butter.

God's in His Heaven.
All's right with the world.
Amen!

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

BHUJANG MESHRAM

Winds

Each one has a faded horizon
and a restless fluttering eye,
The anchored winds are never unaware
either of directions or of the sea's facial conception
Testimonials of culture groomed in darkness
get cheaper all over
like citizens of the milky way
And shores that nurtured members are strengthened
But their eyes contain sea-like
forest sancturies made up of dreams
And the shores remember
jarring inverted memories of destructive cyclones
Stacks of books grow in volume
And explorers like Columbus
...Unprivileged forest and the unprivileged sky...
Exhibitions of primitive values pass under the name of art
Paintings weep like the skies
of a rainy day
People pass observing shadows
as the winds, unloosed, seek their way
to the storm that rises eastwards
And so each has a faded horizon
and a restless fluttering eye.

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

BABAN LONDHE

Shroud

On a plain so vast our eyes could not reach
they would make speeches to their hearts' content
and shout out novel slogans,
blow a breath of hope on our overtired limbs.
At times, to our shanty towns they would come,
careful not to rumple their ironed clothes
crossing our lanes and alleys,
jumping across streaming gutters
when they stopped beside our doors
we felt inexplicably moved.
Viewing our pitiable state they would say
'Truly, this needs a social economic cultural change,
the whole picture needs to be changed.'
Then we would sing
their songs
in sonorous full-throated tones.
Acting innocuous, they would eat
the marrow of our bones.
Days passed by.
Darkness pressed from all sides,
We battled against sunshine and rain
And like fools awaiting salvation
we have stood our ground
and are sunk to the neck in mire.
But now they say plans are worked out
for our salvation
— covering our wasted tombs
in a new shroud.
What munificence!

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

SHANKAR KHARAT

The Death-doomed March

People cringe under the heavy burden of misery
Seas of suffering gush out from their hearts
Horrid despair covers them like a winding sheet
Innumerable worms of death wriggle deep down in their hearts.
They have been imprisoned for life in the Andamans!
I see on their weary faces a veil of darkened centuries
Never have they enjoyed the balmy warmth of the sun
Nor indulged in the arching rainbow of sweet dreams
This cruel tradition deprived them of dignity simply human
And inflicted on them wearisome trudging
on the blood stained path
Tramping with doleful strides
my people walk along the path of doom
And their death-doomed march evokes
a terrible challenge for my feeble arms.

Translated by H.V. Shintre

MEENA GAJABHIYE

Light Melted in Darkness

Day slants, narrows down
And then I melt
in the empty space of darkness.
Though I am severed in two
no one cares
Their leafless bough
never blossoms!
Although they strike root
seeped in my blood
I am entangled in python-coils
for ages.
Their venomous hiss
turns my day into night
And when I reach out for a sun-ray
it recedes far away
like the end of a dream
when the eyelid is opened.

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

ARUN KAMBLE

Which Language should I Speak?

Chewing trotters in the badlands
my grandpa,
the permanent resident of my body,
the household of tradition heaped on his back,
hollers at me,
'You whore-son, talk like we do.
Talk, I tell you!'

Picking through the Vedas
his top-knot well-oiled with ghee,
my Brahmin teacher tells me,
'You idiot, use the language correctly!'
Now I ask you,
Which language should I speak?

Translated by Priya Adarkar

W. KAPUR

The Search

What bird is this that sings a song
filled with such sorrow
Such aching notes
in the dead of night
when my hut in its yard of densest dark
is drenched to the brim of its heart?
Nor can I,
wanting to follow him,
find my voice
or his direction
Will someone tell me his name
and the branch where he makes his home?
Or are you all, like me, strangers?
Have you, like me, lost your light?
At least my hut holds its warmth
Perhaps I could give him some,
Put embers in his voice.

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

PRAKASH JADHAV

Under Dadar Bridge

The three bricks of the sacrificial fire
she used to light
have sooty ornamental marks — signs of
loathsome destruction,
charred *neem* twigs, and the arrogant touch
of Impalas, choking and dragging with them
the breath of roads.
The ashes of existence float in the air.
She has left
the ruined sculpture of her relics
under Dadar bridge.
As she tore her ragged hair
in the darkness of frustration,
I, poison-drunk and restless,
would dig my fingers into the
gooseflesh-navel,
profusely pouring black blood into
her psychic wounds.
'Hey, Ma, tell me my religion. Who am I?
What am I?'
'You are not a Hindu or a Muslim!
You are an abandoned spark of the
world's lusty fires.
Religion? This is where I stuff religion!
Whores have only one religion, my son.
If you want a hole to fuck in, keep
your cock in your pocket!'
Stripping the sari off her breasts
on that bridge
she would fling on my questioning face
repulsive smiles, one after another,
like stones.

I piss in the bastard gutter which
has links with high-class sewage water
'Who was he? Who's my father?'
Scraping and scratching at the VD sores
that traced
the world's map on her flower-like breasts,
shrivelled during the malaria epidemic,
she would answer: 'He was some swine or other!'
A star going berserk shot out of the
valley between my eyebrows:
'Whore ! Tell me the truth, or else...'
'Why? Was there only one who mounted
and then abandoned my body?
How many names shall I mention?
Many came and many went.'
'You're a whore, sss!'
A scream like a venomous snakebite
would break out involuntarily from
my bloodied lips
She was engrossed in pulling out hunks
from the cat-flesh
boiled in her begging-bowl,
her eyes were sharp like the razor edge
that scalps the world.
'My stomach was on fire with hunger,
and they needed my cold corpse!'
She would take the scab off the green wound
and show me the ancient leprosy coursing
through her blood.
Stumbling through the dense darkness of life
she would callously dynamite my
most dearly cherished dream —
'Show me my father, or perform his last rites.'
She would bray, that she-donkey of Bhadrapad,
spitting on the fire in the *chula*,
brutally exposing both her nakedness
and mine.
Then the raging volcanoes of my innermost being
would break and tear into my heart.
'I'll rip your clothes off! I'll strip you naked!'

'What's left with me now? I gave
them my lifeblood,
they gave me only wounds.'
Baring her teeth, like bramble thorns, hissing,
'You want to see, don't you, where
you come from?
What path you took?
Take my clothes off. Strip me and
have a good long look at the tomb
that was broken open to pull you out.'
Dashing ice-cold water on my maddened sex-organs,
she would kick at my cold, convulsive
shudders, and run amuck.
Many stones and much mud
slid off the bridge.
Under Dadar bridge, my questions echo,
the hostile stars eat like maggots
into my future,
my buried dreams.
The umbilical cord I myself
had hung up to dry
there in the crevices of stone walls.
One day, ma died...
When the rudder of her raft broke
in the cruel seas under the bridge,
I was asking these Himalayan people, whose
heads drift proudly in cultured skies
to allow me to continue living.
Now I sit beside unrecorded memories,
and those scattered sculptures, in an empty hour,
and cry.
Not that she hasn't left a lot
behind her for me.
Hereditary diseases rebelling underskin
are even now gradually bursting out
all over my face.
When striped and patterned,
wholly panther-like,
I stand under the bridge,
some white-collared mountain-dwellers

throw me coins
because of her.

Translated by Shanta Gokhale and Nissim Ezekiel

MANOHAR WAKODE

It is Not Binding on Us to Undertake this Journey

It is not binding on us to undertake this jouney
The ravished landscape, the settlements
of emaciated bodies
couldn't be the path of life, could it?
And are we to rest under this leafless tree?
Or quench a lifetime's thirst
in these dry riverbeds?
No, this ravishment would never be
our way of life.
The sun vomiting fire,
valleys gagged with the silence of ages,
the parched desert
and wild flowers trampled upon —
their bodies reduced to thorn
and only our feet unshod
A road must be levelled out
smooth and metalled,
which is why I say
It is not binding on us to undertake this journey.
It's a flock of sheep which walks
along the metalled road and when time comes
returns mutely to the fold
And we understand.

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

BHAU PANCHBHAI

How?

How do we taste milk in this town
where trees are planted of venom?
Enemies invite nothing but enmity
How can we share a drink of friendship?
How can I know this town as my own
where workmen are slaughtered daily?
How do I burn to light the path
at this turn
where hutments are set on fire?
They all partake of fruits of faithlessness
How am I to join such company?
Change your cradle if you would
How do I twist the shape of a newborn babe?
I see the clash of prisoners
trained in schools of warfare
They die, how am I to survive here?

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

DAYA PAWAR

Blood-wave

My ear pressed to your side
heavy with child,
I hear rumours of the ocean.
The waves of blood swelling out
from a body fulfilled.
The mine nudging the seaweed is
eager for its first glimpse
of the universe.
Fists tight … clenched for a blow,
the life small as a fist
is aflame with ardour.
But you are so desolate … why desolation?
Do you fear —
As our generations gave lifelong battle
battered by wind and rain
Our birthing bed arrayed
under a palm-leaf thatch
Feasting off gruel
boiled rolling on our cooking fires
Do you fear,
As our generations grown bull-strong, bull-humped
pulling the village like a cart,
became lifeless lumps worth mud,
he too will be mud?
Truly, if he is to be
thus crushed and lifeless
Then — remember the Greek myth? —
As soon as the cord is cut
let's burn, scorch, fire-harden him
in leaping flames. This phoenix
feeding on live coals
will brave the powerful skies

and all that this nation never offered
to you or me — the joy, the glory —
he will pull down to his feet.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE

White Paper

I do not ask
for the sun and moon from your sky
your farm, your land,
your high houses or your mansions
I do not ask for gods or rituals,
    castes or sects
Or even for your mother, sisters, daughters.
I ask for
my rights as a man.
Each breath from my lungs
sets off a violent trembling
in your texts and traditions
your hells and heavens
fearing pollution.
Your arms leapt together
to bring to ruin our dwelling places.
You'll beat me, break me,
loot and burn my habitation
But my friends!
How will you tear down my words
planted like a sun in the east?
My rights: contagious caste riots
festering city by city, village by village,
    man by man
For that's what my rights are —
Sealed off, outcast, road-blocked, exiled.
I want my rights, give me my rights.
Will you deny this incendiary state of things?
I'll uproot the scriptures like railway tracks.
Burn like a city bus your lawless laws

My friends!
My rights are rising like the sun.
Will you deny this sunrise?

Translated by Priya Adarkar

UMAKANT RANDHIR

A Poem

Flourishing on your head
the gold crown of high caste birth
(wrought by yourself alone)
To the throne of unquestioned supremacy
you cleaved very hard
through centuries together
like a pale house lizard!
Extolling the ratiocinative maze
of the shastras and puranas
Belching fumes of fulfilment
you drove in a chariot
drawn by horses three
extracting obsequious servility
of the obsolescent century.
But the blinded centuries
lying prostrate at your feet
are burnt down to ashes
in the funeral pyre of time
Now, in this space age
your intellectual vanity is bust
And your throne? There it lies
pulverized into the dust.

Translated by H. V. Shintre

YUSOJA

Mute Existence

On roads laid out according to the Plan
breaths thwarted till yesterday, crawled and sped along
And with each swing of these orphaned breaths
my mute existence was moved
and swayed as a pendulum.
The unscrupulous pundits awaken desire
in the stillborn womb of civilization,
flaunted overhead, naked placards
with slogans of purity and holiness
their metaphysical gymnastics trampled and
    scattered my life, unbalanced already,
the life of the Dalits crushed
by tyrant stones of grinding inequality.
When it was hung upon a peg by the long leash
they had twisted and strung
Each angry wound faced by my blood turned
to speak with its neighbours
the language of revolution.
Maybe in future to quench the thirst for triumph
each wet bloodline etched upon my heart
will scream and wail
And the evening will collapse in death
which is here burning in flames
Then to patch up the light of dawn
I will need some ruthless stitches
and perhaps to attain unity
the bleeding light in pain may try to befriend
every sun which has set
on this part of the planet.

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

SHIVA INGOLE

Ancient Mother Mine

None but I
have tattooed songs of liberty
on the bare torsos
and planted drums of defiance
on the lips
of womenfolk here.
From then on, my ancient mother
conceives not the progeny
of the sun and the moon.
At such a juncture
even the aged cows
are not sold to the butcher
But here —
in the polluted atmosphere
of vedantic wrangling
all Draupadis are
auctioned in the bazaar
and
I run a school for bastardized mothers and sisters
Since then, my ancient mother
scrapes together
rags of freedom
to cover
her naked bosom.

Translated by H.V. Shintre

F. M. SHINDE

Habit

Once you're used to it
you never afterwards·
feel anything;
your blood nevermore
congeals
nor flows
for wet mud has been slapped
over all your bones.
Once you're used to it
even the sorrow
that visits you
sometimes, in dreams,
melts away, embarrassed.
Habit isn't used to breaking out
in feelings.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

BABURAO BAGUL

You who have Made the Mistake

Those who leave for foreign lands,
embrace other tongues, dress in alien garb
and forget this country
— them I salute.
And those who don't forget,
and don't change even after being beaten up for centuries
— such hypocrites I ask:
What will you say if someone asked you —
What is untouchability?
Is it eternal like God?
What's an untouchable like? What does he look like?
Does he look like the very image of leprosy?
Or like the prophet's enemy?
Does he look like a heretic, a sinner, a profligate, or an atheist?
Tell me,
What will your answer be?
Will you reply without hesitation:
'Untouchable — that's me?'
That's why I say —
You who have made the mistake of being born in this country
must now rectify it: either leave the country,
or make war!

Translated by Vilas Sarang

Autobiographical Extracts

Autobiographical Extracts

SHANKARRAO KHARAT

A Corpse in the Well

I knew clearly the dangers of village duty. It was a perpetual noose around the neck of a Mahar! My father was crushed flat by this duty. Here is the story of one of his experiences — a near fatal one. I still shiver at the thought of it.

It was our turn to do the customary duty at our village, Kamat. We had a house there. It was summer, so I was home on vacation.

A corpse was floating in an abandoned well near the village. It had bloated and risen to the surface. The Patil, the village chief, had already received the news in the evening. The Mahars and the Ramoshis too had got the news. Anna, my father, as the Mahar on village duty, and one of the Ramoshis, had both reported at the place where the corpse lay. Anna and the Ramoshi stayed up the whole night by the well, guarding the corpse.

Then it was the morning of the next day. The head constable and another constable were expected from the police post, to conduct an initial inquiry about the corpse. Till then, as per routine, the Mahar and the Ramoshi would have to guard it. My mother knew this was so. But now the night was over, the morning sun, too, had begun to descend and it was afternoon; yet father had not returned home. So my mother sent me to the well with *bhakri* wrapped in a cloth for Anna to eat. I hopped towards the well like a bounding deer. Seeing Anna sitting close by, I went to him and said, 'Anna! the night is over. The day's nearly gone. Mother is waiting for you! When are you coming home?'

He glanced at the well and replied, 'But the chief constable and the constable are yet to arrive! They will carry out the inquest; only then can the Mahar rest. So go and tell Mother that I'll be very late.'

He took out a pipe from his pocket and filled it with tobacco. He lit it with a flint and started smoking. I felt he was suppressing his hunger with it. I quickly said, 'Anna I have brought *bhakri* for you. Do eat it!'

'No, son, I'll only have time to eat my bread when everything is

over with this corpse. Not before that!'

'But when will it all be over? And how long will you go without food?' To my questions, Anna replied, 'The village chief was here a little while ago. He told me that the head constable has arrived in the village. But he is dining. He'll come only when he has finished eating and drinking. When the corpse is fetched out of the well, the inquest will be held. Then we'll be free.'

Looking at the village chief who was sitting under the shadow of a distant tree, I said, 'Anna! The constable will come after his meal. The village chief has also filled his belly. Then why can't you too eat your bread? Why must you remain hungry?'

'Oh, they are officers! How can they work without food?'

'Then why should we work on an empty stomach? We're human beings, too.'

'That's what village duty is, my boy! Who cares if a Mahar lives or dies?'

Then I suggested a way out. 'Anna, you have your bread! I'll stand guard with the Ramoshi till then.'

At this Anna said rather vehemently, 'No! No village duty for you. It's bad enough that we have to endure it. Once you're saddled with the village duty, you'll be stuck with it for life! That's the tradition! That's our doom! You go home. I'll eat when it's time!'

While I was talking to Anna two constables in uniform marched up to us, their hob-nailed boots clattering on the ground. No sooner had they reached the well, than the head constable came pounding up on his horse. All the people around made way for him. The Ramoshi paid his respects from a distance. The village chief stood up and saluted him. Anna bowed in a deep *johar*. The Ramoshi tied up the horse to a tamarind tree. Anna fetched water in a pitcher from another well, which was in a field by the stream. He poured it into the iron trough in front of the horse. Since they were expecting the head constable to come on a horse, the Mahar and the Ramoshi had made all arrangements for the horse's care. They put before the horse a sheaf of green maize shoots which they had brought from the field near the stream. The hungry horse greedily began to munch the fresh green grass.

The head constable, spinning his baton, took a stroll around the well. He peeped into the well, then looked around it and again into it. He walked towards the steps of the well. The upper steps were buried in the soil. Some lower steps had slipped into the water. Some

steps were about to fall away from the level. It was an abandoned well; the structure was old. Inside the rim one could see overgrown, yard-long dried grass; shrubs had sprouted in the dilapidated portions. The upper part of the well had collapsed in ruins and its big long stones were scattered around. Green moss floated on the unused water of the well, and foliage from the trees near the edge had fallen into it and rotted. The well was quite deep. How to remove the corpse from such an awkward well? That was why the head constable looked like a man with a problem. The constable suddenly whispered something to the village chief. The head constable had a secretive discussion with the constable and the village chief about how to remove the corpse. Then coming forward, the constable yelled at Anna, 'What are you waiting for, Mahar? Jump in. How long must the officer stand here?'

Anna immediately replied, 'Constable, the Mahar's village duty is only to guard the corpse. How can we touch it? What would the heirs of this corpse have to say?'

Then the head constable said sharply to Anna, 'What would they say?'

Anna replied, 'The heirs will say, "Were we dead, that you touched our kinsman's corpse?" and they will have a grudge against us Mahars!'

'But I'm ordering you to! What are you afraid of?'

'*Sarkar*, you will go away from here. You will leave this poor Mahar to his fate! We want to go on living in this village!'

I was listening intently to this dialogue between Anna and the head constable. Suddenly, the head constable thundered, 'You lump of dirt! Are you going to jump, or do I have to whip you?'

At these words, Anna remained silent. Seeing that the head constable was enraged, he did not open his mouth. The constable and the village chief started bombarding Anna with threats and curses. They charged at him, overflowing with abuse, but Anna stood like a pillar. Perhaps Anna felt that if he said one word, if he said no, the constable wouldn't stop till he had drubbed him soundly. That must be why he kept quiet. In those days the oppressive power and prestige of the head constable were tremendous. Against this power, a Mahar was a mere wisp of straw.

Seeing and hearing all this was a shock to my young mind. I heard their curses, their threats, their shouting. I thought, whose dead body is this anyway? Whose well? Why should my father have to be cursed

and threatened because of them? This was rank injustice to my father; I was old enough to understand that and also had some education to my credit. So I could see clearly the injustice being done to my father. He had not done anything wrong. His only crime was being the Mahar of the village. I was enraged at what was happening; my gorge rose with anger. In my rage I pushed into the argument. 'What reason have you got to abuse my father? The corpse's relations will come. They will remove the body. Otherwise, if the government feels like removing it, let them remove it themselves! Are you threatening my father just because he's the Mahar on village duty?' I let out this spate of words in one breath.

Suddenly, like a wildcat, the head constable spat threateningly at me, 'Who are you, you little worm?' And he said to the constable, 'Catch him! Give the bastard a good beating!'

At this signal the constable charged at me, raising his baton. I moved back a couple of steps, closer to my father. Anna clasped me to him. Then he too said in a raised voice, 'Shut up, son. You're not old enough to understand. Don't say a word. I'll have to bear whatever happens.' From Anna's words, it was obvious that he had no alternatives left. Everyone was up against him, pushing him into a corner. He got up, removed his clothes, laid them to one side and put a stone on them. Then he went near the well, looked into it from the side which was still strong, and threw a rope down into it. Then he slid down the rope, about halfway down the well. I stood by the rim of the well looking down at Anna. My gaze wandered over the well. Suddenly, I saw a long, slender creature inside. I shouted, 'Anna, there's a snake below! A snake!' Hearing me, Anna stopped moving and hung dangling on the rope. He looked at the water below. Horrified, I shouted, 'Anna! The snake has moved towards the corpse! From under that stone! See there! See below! Come up. I'll go down.' Feeling the vibrations of my shouts, the snake retreated halfway from the water. He went back into the hole and lay peeping out. Anna was still dangling from the rope, looking at the snake. My shouts had drawn everyone's attention and they were craning into the well.

Looking at the snake, the village chief said loudly, 'O Rama! It's not a snake, it's a reptile! It won't bite!' I answered his words of wisdom with, 'Why don't you go down yourself. You'll soon find out what it is!'

'You talk too much,' the head constable said, glaring at me angrily. He issued a command. 'Mahar! Get down there! I am getting late!'

My blood boiled; I swore at him silently, 'Curse this head constable! Was he born of a man or a beast? Whom did his mother lie under?' I could do nothing else to him. But I looked at Anna and shouted, 'Anna, don't go down. Come up. I'll be down there in a minute. Whatever happens let it happen to me. Our family will be helpless without you.'

Anna looked up at me, and said, in despairing anger: 'Son! If it is to happen let it happen to me! Let the village know that the village Mahar Rama died of snake bite. Died while removing a corpse from a ruined well, while he was supposed to be doing his village duty. Let the village know! Let the government know! Let the whole world know!' With these last words, and without further thought, he took his life in both hands, and climbing down the well, went to the other side. Then he tied the legs and neck of the corpse with another rope which had been thrown down. Tied the knot hard, and shouted, 'Yes! Now pull!' The others on village duty pulled out the corpse, for three other Mahars had by now arrived at the site. Inside the well, Anna had been keeping an eye on the reptile, for fear that it would wrap itself round him and kill him. Now with the agility of a snake, he swiftly climbed the rope. The reptile moved from the hole and went slithering through the water, towards the stairs.

The threat to Anna's life had passed. My terror subsided. My eyes had filled with tears. Then Anna held me close to him. I wiped my eyes.

The dead body was bloated. It looked hideous and smelt foul. All had covered their noses. The preliminary inquiry was conducted on the spot. The Mahars shifted the corpse into the bullockcart brought from the farm, and scattered over it *neem* leaves that covered the body completely. Then they took it along a cart-track to a doctor about eight miles away for a postmortem. Anna as the village Mahar, another Mahar, two Ramoshis and a policeman went along with it. Anna wrapped in a fold of his dhoti the bread which I had brought for him, and said to me, 'Now for heaven's sake go home! Tell your mother that I am going to the dispensary along with the corpse.'

Anna set out. The cart disappeared along the road; then Anna disappeared too. Then I went home, numbed.

A storm of thoughts swept through my mind about the dangerous, deadly work involved in village duty. Why do Mahars do this kind of work? I asked myself. But the Mahars had moved the High Court fighting for the Mahar *vatan* share, a quarter of the share.

Only after I myself had become an advocate did I learn that for the sake of this hereditary right — this worthless right — the Mahars had played the game of litigation right up to the High Court.

Translated by Priya Adarkar
An extract from Taral-Antaral

DAYA PAWAR

'Son, Eat your Fill'

My father worked in the dry dock in Bombay. I used to call him Dada. Even today, my own son calls me Dada. I don't like the idea of his calling me Daddy or Papa. That would be like a foreign cactus grafted on a native prickly pear.

What was I saying? Oh, yes. In those days we stayed at the Kaavakhana. A ten-by-twelve room. An indoor tap. A common latrine. My mother, grandmother and uncle's family lived there too.

You won't find the Kaavakhana in a map of Bombay today. In those days, the tram that started from the 'Khada Parsi' statue would pass the corner of Foras Road and go towards Girgaum. Aji — my grandmother — remembered seeing a horse-drawn tram. She used to tell us her memories. So when I was small, I would see vividly how the horse must have pulled the tram over the bridge, how he must have foamed at the mouth. The Nagpada area began at the end of the bridge. It was in Nagpada that the Kaavakhana stood. Today there's a massive six-storey building there. At one end of the Kaavakhana there was Chor Bazaar. On the other, was Kamathipura. At the Golpitha was the red-light district. And beyond it was the Kaavakhna which could be reached from either side.

The Mahar community lived in little islands in the surrounding area. They were all from the Ghats, gathered together from Sangamner, Akola, Junnar, or Sinnar. Around them lived Christians and Muslims.

The Mahars' living conditions were wretched. In each little cubby-hole, there were three or four sub-tenants. In between them were partitions made of packing-case wood. In these wooden boxes was their entire world. The men worked as porters. Some went to work in mills and factories.

The women were not kept in purdah. On the contrary, they slaved even more than their men. However much a drunken husband belaboured them, they would look after him, even pander to his addiction. Their occupation was to collect rags, papers, broken glass,

iron and bottles in the street, bring them home, sort them out all night, and go and sell them in the morning. Just nearby was the Mangaldas market where trading in cloth took place. These women would gather the paper swept out of those shops. Each woman had her own appointed shop. There would be fierce quarrels about who should take the rubbish from which shop. And the shop assistants would be bribed in small coin.

Some women washed the saris of the prostitutes in the nearby brothels. Some would cook *bajri bhakris* and *barbaat* for the whores who were bored with eating *kheema* and bread. An occasional quarrelsome brothel customer would demand one of these women. At such a time they would with difficulty guard their honour, fragile as glass, and escape him.

There was another special thing about the Kaavakhana — a club attached to the area. An almost open one, in front of the big hall, made of matting walls with a tarpaulin roof. It was this club itself that was called the Kaavakhana. White men, Jews, strapping Arabs — occasionally a Black among them — such were the rich men who gambled all day in the club. Their games were varied. Cards, poker, billiards. We used to stand and watch that game of billiards through a crack in the closed door, see them pushing around those shining, coloured balls with a smooth-slipping stick.

The men in our tenement never played that game. It was imprinted on their minds that it was not a game for the poor.

We never saw the rich men in this club going to work. They loitered there from morning to midnight, drinking tea without milk. There was another drink they would take too, one made of cocoa beans. They called it 'kaava'. We used to wonder what joy those Jews, red as carrots, could get from drinking that black, bitter brew.

Talking of Jews reminds me — they had a strange ritual method of slaughtering chickens. A Jew killing a chicken never cut its throat clean from side to side with a knife. A chicken with its throat half-slit would be thrown into the *maidan* in front of us. It would spout blood and desperately flap its wings. We couldn't bear to watch such cruel games. This butchery would go on all the time next to the huge Jewish synagogue that was on our road to and from school. Our hair leapt on end when we saw it happen...

Sometimes, the club was a nuisance to the neighbourhood. We could never tell when there would be a riot, when chairs and vessels would be thrown about. All day long words such as 'satta', 'race' or

'betting' would fall on our ears. These men had dealings in thousands of rupees right there where they sat. Some would be fake, some genuine.

When we children, all of my age, woke up in the morning, we would be asked what we had dreamt of in the night. If we had dreamt of fire, that meant a particular number, if water, then another. This would be the topic of conversation in the morning. In this 'China-betting' game, one anna was a sufficient wager. All the adults in the house took part with enthusiasm. Even the mad man lying on the footpath, a heap of dirt on his body, had his worth in the game of 'satta'. Meanings would be read into whatever gestures he made. Someone's fortunes would bear fruit as a result, and the mad man would be respected as an auspicious man.

Adjoining the club was a horseshoe-shaped tenement with a tiled roof. That is where we used to live. Around us lived the four hardworking sons of my grandmother's elder sister. My father's brother was called Jaba, and these four uncles were named Rabha, Naba, Shiva and Kaba. I called one of them Tatya, another Baba. One of them pulled a handcart, another was a porter. At first only my father worked in the dock. Then he stuck them on there with him one by one.

Aji, my grandmother, worked in the dogs' dispensary at Byculla. A sahib who knew her had done her this favour. The dogs of the gentry used to come there for medical treatment. Her work was to give them their milk, clean out their dirt, bathe them with soap. I sometimes went to the hospital with Aji. I used to love the newborn puppies, and felt like just sitting and watching them. I enjoyed hearing the slurping, sucking sounds they made as they drank milk out of a wide china dish. I felt like hugging them close to me. But I didn't dare touch them, for fear of what the sahib would say.

There was a real little island of our relations in the Kaavakhana. A man pulls his coat close about him in a strong wind, they say. In the same manner, these relations lived close to one another. Their mutual love and hate were limitless. From their quarrels you would think that these people would never again see each other's faces; that they would scatter far apart in that great metropolis. But nothing like that actually happened. Their condition was like that of beans that are uprooted together when their vine is uprooted from the earth.

When these people came here to stay, the large building opposite was vacant. But because they didn't want the bother of climbing up

and down the stairs, they chose this low-tiled tenement, which had probably been a stable in the past. Even today, I am amused at their ignorance.

Of course, there may not have been just one reason for what they did. Their business was gathering the rubbish of the whole of Bombay. Who would have let them stay in a flat in the building opposite, if that was their trade?

But for that reason, what a hell they lived in! And how many of my growing years did I spend there! Almost all the rooms leaked in the monsoons. All night long, vessels and pans would be put down in spot after spot. It was hard to know when sleep finally came to us across the music of this *jal tarang*.

At first I was the youngest child in all the houses about us, and was petted a great deal. If I made the excuse of a headache and stretched out on the quilt, a once a bright yellow *malpua* from the Irani restaurant across the way would appear in front of me. And at once my headache would stop. They used to make fun of my illness in the house. But no one would scold me.

One pay day came... Dada and Tatya got paid the same day. I threw a tantrum for a suit and boots. I don't think I was old enough to wear them. I was probably seven or eight years old. But I cried and screamed.

At last they take me to Pila House. I see such huge, shining, glass-fronted shops for the first time. They buy me a woollen jacket and pants and shiny black boots. I can't even wait till I get home; I change my clothes right there in the shop. I don't know what Dada feels as he watches me. A photograph of all of us is taken that day.

I preserved that photograph for a long time. But in these twenty-five or so years of house-moving within Bombay (after the fashion of the scorpion whose house is on his back), somewhere in that confusion the photograph has been lost. Today I feel as if a priceless treasure has been robbed. A rare photograph of Dada and Tatya. That is the only memento I have of them. But even that memento is lost to time.

I can still remember Dada's face. Dada was dark as black wood, tall and skinny. His clothes were spick and span. A crisp white mercerised dhoti of good quality. A woollen jacket. A high black cap of the 'Gandharva' brand on his head. He had a good smile, and when he laughed, a speck of gold shone on one tooth. He could neither read nor write. But for the photograph, he had a bulky volume in his hands, and a pen was clipped to his coat pocket.

Tatya was princely in his bearing. His hair was neatly combed back. He was up-to-date in all he did. At one time he used to engage in gymnastics. He played with stick and sword, and could fight with a lathi. He could halve a lemon with ease, with a sword and a stick. Around his neck, on a black thread, he used to wear an amulet for strength.

My grandmother was a simple soul, a fund of anecdotes. Her name was Devkai. She had lost her husband at an early age, and borne her widowhood with great courage. She had scraped and scraped to bring up her two sons. If one asked her:

'Aji, when did you come to Bombay?' she would look off into the distance and reply:

'It was like this, son. Your grandpa Bhaga died of drink. Your pa was just knee-high. Tatya was a baby. They were very hard on us in the village. Our turn used to come for the Mahars' duties. There was no grown man in my house. So my relations, too, used to be cruel to me. The widow should call out the village proclamations, they said. She should be asked to guard the village gate. She should help carry the carcasses of dead animals. If anyone in the village died, we had to go from village to village, come rain or shine, and give the news. These were the jobs of the Mahars.

'Once the Patil sent me to cry out a proclamation in the village. It was the Holi season. There was smallpox in the village. The cart of the goddess Mariai was going in procession to the next village. The Mahars used to pull it. If it was stopped at that time, the smallpox would increase. So the Patil told me to cry this proclamation in the village: "Don't stop or delay the cart." I took the stick with bells in my hands and was going round shouting the proclamation. And there was young Kondiba, sitting on the threshold of Vithoba's temple. I don't know what whim he had. Maybe he wanted to make a joke of me. He stood in my way and said: "Catch hold of this Mahar woman. Tie her up in the square. Has she gone mad? She's quite happily saying 'Don't fry or fuck.'" A crowd had gathered. Some were laughing. Some were furious with me. I fell at the feet of the villagers. I swore earnestly about what proclamation I had really been crying out, but they wouldn't listen. My husband's cousin heard about it in the Mahar quarter. He was a little respected in the village. When he came, the villagers finally let go of me.

'I couldn't sleep all night. I thought hard. I didn't want to stay at that place. I took my two sons and came to Bombay, and lived under

the protection of my sister.'

Aji could remember no names earlier than her father-in-law's. We read many people's genealogies in books. The many-branched family trees of others are written in histories. But I don't know any names earlier that my great-grandfather's. They say that the names of people's ancestors are preserved in the books of the *pandas* and other Brahmins at places of pilgrimage. But would my ancestors have gone to such pilgrim centres? If they went at all, they would have gone to Khandoba at Jejuri.

Aji has remained embedded in my memory for another reason. When the breadwinner of the house sat to eat, Aji used to sit by him till he finished, stroking his back and repeating, like a refrain, 'Son, eat your fill.'

While Dada was the breadwinner, and brought home his pay, Aji used to sit next to him. After Dada, came Tatya's turn. He once came home royally drunk. When Tatya sat to eat, Aji's refrain went on, 'Son, eat your fill.' Tatya grew wild with rage that day, he threw his *thali* angrily into the courtyard in front of the house. All the food fell into the dirt. He said furiously: 'Will you say it again: "Eat your fill, son?" Am I a little child?'

For two or three days Aji was quiet. But her habit never left her. Later, when I grew up and started working and bringing home the cash, Aji used to sit by me as I ate. She used to stroke my back and mutter, 'Son, eat your fill.' My eyes would swim with tears.

Today Aji is dead and buried. When I sit to eat I remember her. Her words ring in my ears. If you think of it, Aji never knew a moment's happiness all her life. But today I wonder how harsh reality had not ground out the gentleness and affection in her nature. Old people like Aji and of her generation are vanishing fast. I see around me only people with mercenary motives and bitterness in their pocket.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

An extract from Baluta

DAYA PAWAR

'We are Kings!'

The Maharwada I saw as a little boy has been destroyed in the last thirty or forty years. But how shall I wipe away the image of it I got as a child? It lingers with me forever.

But one thing is true; the Mahar-dom I saw as a child did not have the character of beggary. The share that the Mahars got in the harvest, they felt, was theirs by right. Legends about the fifty-two rights their ancestors had been given through a deed of gift had been handed down for generations, and everyone had great pride in this tradition.

They had received a grant of land that carried only a nominal tax. This is something you see particularly in western Maharashtra. The piece of land near the house was called the *hadki* or 'little bone.' I don't know why; perhaps because the bones of an animal used to lie in this ground after it had been skinned; hence 'little bone.' The land which was far from the village, in the lee of the hill, was called the *hadvala* (also from 'bone'). I never saw the Mahars from the village ploughing that land. It was said that they used to do so once, before I was born. But the people of the village used that land as the grazing ground for the village cattle, as it was so far away. A nominal compensation was paid for this.

A disturbing story had been handed down among the Mahars about the fifty-two rights. It was that the Muslim king of Paithan and Bedar had given these fifty-two rights to the Mahars. Later I was able to see the wording of the deed of gift in Vitthal Ramji Shinde's *The Untouchable Problems in India*. The deed read thus: 'A bastion was under construction at Purandhar Fort, but the work was not coming to completion. The king had a vision that if someone's eldest son and daughter-in-law were buried in the bastion, the work would be completed. The king woke up as soon as the vision was over, and told the news to Yesaji Naik Chibe. Then Yesaji Naik began to say, "I will give my son and daughter-in- law." Then Nathanak, the son of Bahrinak Sonnak, and his wife Devkai, these two were buried in the orange bastion on the eighth day of Ashwin. And the work of the

bastion was completed.'

Even though this was the official deed granting the fifty-two rights, there was yet another legend about it prevalent among the Mahars. It was about the loyalty of one particular Mahar.

The king has a young and beautiful daughter who has to be escorted to Delhi. In those days there was a thick jungle on the way, and no vehicles. This Mahar, too, is young and he is robust. After he has left the king's daughter at her destination and returned, a suspicion is voiced against him in the durbar. The charge is that he has probably raped the girl on the way. Now, the Mahar has left a little wooden box with the king before his departure, saying, 'It is something valuable of mine; return it when I come back.' The young Mahar now asks for the little box to be opened. In it is his penis, cut off before he went. The king is pleased with his loyalty, and tells the young man, 'Ask for whatever you want.'

The young Mahar says, 'I don't want anything myself, but give my caste something that will last them for generations.' The king gives this deed granting the fifty-two rights. Mahar-dom consisted of glorious traditions like this one.

The Mahar-dom I saw as a child is imprinted on my heart. This part is hard to erase. It will go only when I die. The helplessness you see besmeared on my face is from that time. Scratch it — draw blood even — but it will not be wiped away.

There was no time-table for a Mahar's work. He was tied to it twenty-four hours, the slave of whatever work fell his way. It was called forced labour.

To do this work required little study or skill. Some traditional Mahar jobs had fallen into disuse. But some others still remained, like a yoke on our necks. Taking the taxes of the whole village to the *taluka* town; running in front of the horses of the big people who came to the village, looking after their animals, and giving them fodder and water; making proclamations; if anyone of the village died, going from village to village giving the news; dragging away dead animals; chopping wood; beating the drum for village festivals; doing *aarati* to bridegrooms at the entrance of the village; and so on. These were Mahars' jobs. And what did they get in payment? The *baluta*: a share in the harvest.

I used to accompany my mother without fail when I was a small child, to ask for this share. Each house's appointed servant would set out. Even a shaven widow would go for her share of the harvest along

with the rest of the Mahars, once the grain was stacked in the Marathas' threshing floors or fields. A coarse blanket would be carried along. The farmers would grumble as they handed over the sheaves. They would say, 'You Mahars, you lazy sons of bitches, you're always first to ask for your share. Think it's your father's grain, do you?'

The Mahars of those days were no weaklings. They were coal-black and solidly built. They talked toughly to the Marathas. The Marathas wanted to give us the top portion of the stack of unthreshed grain. Finally, once the stacks had been taken out, the Mahars would spread their blankets over the grain. When it was spread, the villagers would give the Mahars all the grain that was under the blanket. But as they gave it, they would keep up a continuous stream of abuse. And the Mahars would begin to tie up their bundles as if nothing were the matter.

I remember an incident to do with Mahar duties. Once the taxes of the whole village had been collected, a Mahar had to take them to the *taluka* town. This collective tax was called a *patti*. When the *patti* was paid, a receipt had to be obtained from the courthouse clerk.

An old widow from a neighbouring village had come in this manner to pay the *patti*. A simple-minded old woman. She gave the *patti* to the clerk, but forgot to take a receipt. The clerk has no humanity in him. The next day the old woman comes running to the *kacheri* for the receipt. The clerk is a Brahmin. He maintains a complete blank about what has happened. She returns to the village beating her breast in despair. Of course, she is duly accused of and tried for embezzling the money. The old woman makes piteous laments and invokes the village goddess. But no one has mercy on her; all revile her. She is handcuffed and brought to the *taluka* town. The crime of embezzling the village *patti* is established in court. The clerk washes his hands off this affair and goes scot-free. She serves a two- or three-month sentence and returns.

Horrific occurences like this also take place while doing a Mahar's duties. Once there was a tremendous quarrel between the villagers and the Mahars over the sharing of the harvest. It was like this. The tradition was that when the share of the harvest came in, the sheaves were at once divided. The villagers really did not consider how much of their income went to the Mahars. Just as it was easy to feed dogs and cats, so was the case with the Mahars, was the villagers' simple reckoning. Besides, it was a belief that one earned good karma by feeding Mahars and orphans. The villagers considered it an ornament

to the village to have Mahars in it.

There is a story about a village where the Mahars, tired of their ill-treatment, set out to leave for ever. The villagers stopped their Mahars at the boundary, mollified them and brought them back with all due honour.

The villagers probably feared that if there were no Mahars in the village, there would be some great calamity. That was the incident. So the Mahars and the villagers never let their mutual tensions go to a snapping point.

One year, the Mahars in the village decided that they wouldn't divide the harvest between them. They decided instead to invite the forty villages around them to a big feast. Only the Mahars would come, of course. A huge pile of the Mahars' share of the harvest was heaped up in the *hadki* near the village. Even the village headman did not have such a big amount.

The villagers all stared angrily. The outcry arose in the village: 'The Mahars are growing fat on our labour.' That was all that was required.

Next year the Mahars got no share of the harvest. There were twenty or thirty Mahar households and almost two thousand of the villagers. That was the size of the great quarrel.

There was only one Chamar household in the village. But they did not get involved in the Mahars' quarrels. The business of that household — leather buckets and ropes — depended on the village. By comparison, some families in the Maharwada were quite well-off. Some had bullock-carts on the road, drawn by herd bulls, and milch-cattle in their homes. In the Konkan, they worked as drovers. They would buy good stallions and the local breed of bulls in the villages around, and go down from the Ghats and sell them in the Konkan.

I remember the Mahars I saw as a child. They were tall and sturdy, and black as pitch. The whole village was terrified of them. The reason for the terror was the particular power they had: that of the "Soma Mahar". Soma Mahar was a variety of poison. I once saw some of it tied in a little bundle that Uma-Ajya had. It was pure white. Once the Mahars pulled out this weapon, the cattle in the village would rapidly die off. It was a horrible thing to do. But if any man swollen with his wealth oppressed the Mahars, this weapon was soon drawn against him. What did the Mahars do? They would take a bunch of millet or a piece of *bhakri* and mix the poison with it. This would be fed to the animal at the dead of night when nobody could see. Even the Mahar

child no bigger than your fist would do this work. The Mahars thus killed two birds with one stone. They hit a hard blow at their opponents, and they got the animal's meat and its hide. Once in a way the villagers would teach the Mahars a lesson by not giving them the animal, but digging a grave in the fields and burying it.

However, the village was never united over this issue. Just like the Maharwada, the village, too, had its factions. Two of the factions were fierce ones. They had fallen out only over surnames, Awari and Papal. The Awaris were more numerous, the Papals were fewer in the village; hence the Awaris were always recognized as the village Patils. They were in the forefront at the Pola festival or on religious occasions. The Papals were outsiders who had come to the village. The Awaris treated them like immigrants. When the Papals came, they brought a Mahar with them. That was the Rupavate of our village. We Pawars were the Awaris' watchmen. We asked for our share of the harvest from them, and the Rupavates from the Papals. But if any animal belonging to either family died, all of us Mahars used to butcher it together.

Of course there were turns for that as well. If the villagers turned nasty and started grumbling even a little, the Mahars would forget their divisions and come together. Gleaming butcher's knives would be arranged in the corner of the square. 'I'll tear each one's backside apart' was the aggressive vow each Mahar would take. Then the village would impose a ban on the Mahars. The village was closed to them. So was the road. So was labour. At such a time a sensible villager would try and effect a truce.

I remember such a truce attempt. The village and the Maharwada are at daggers drawn. On the boundary of the Maharwada are arranged heaps of stones and pebbles. A woman from each household stands, arms akimbo, on each heap. Since it looks as if there will be bloodshed in the village, the Mahars are summoned to the temple. Barebodied, ragged men, bearing gleaming knives over their shoulders, go and stand in the courtyard in front of the temple.

There the Patil, the Kulkarni and other weighty citizens of the village are seated. The conversation begins right there:

'Who do you people think you are?'

The strapping young Kashiba, black as night and sturdy-limbed, answers.

'We are kings !'

'Kings of what?'

'Kings of ourselves!'

That day of course there was no truce.

The quarrel over the division of water, however, was smouldering for a long time. The Mahars' well was to the west of the village. If one wanted to fetch water, one had to go through the village, and at that, past the temple of Maruti.

The villagers' well was below the village. By that well, however, there was a notice placed by the local Board, which said, 'This well is open to people of all castes and creeds.'

But the Mahars were never to be seen at this well. The water of the Mahars' well was abundant, dark and delicious. In the summer it was as cold as water from an earthenware pot. As a child I always wondered why the villagers were so stupid. For to tell the truth, our well was at a height and the village well in a low-lying land. The water from our well must have been seeping into theirs. But it was impossible for those Marathas to grasp what I could grasp even at that young age.

The Chamars never drank from our well. They would have lost caste by doing so. The women of the Chamar families used to sit for hour after hour by the Marathas' well to beg a potful of water. The village well had a fine paved floor. The water wheel turned fast; its sound was constantly in one's ears. Our well, however, had no water-wheel. One had to stand on the edge and draw water in a bucket. The favourite summer afternoon occupation of children of my age was to go to the well and stand for hours drawing water and pouring it over ourselves.

The Mahar women's shadow fell on Maruti on their way to and from the well. The god was polluted. So one day the villagers closed the road to us.

To go to the well by another route, one had to walk by the edge of the lake, beating out a path in the mud. And the path was a mile long. The Mahars fought with the village to have the road opened to them. There was legal action. 'We won't give up our right of way. If you want, you can install Maruti elsewhere.'

This was the hostile argument the Mahars set forth.

While this quarrel was in progress, a miracle occurred. A new *mamlatdar*, a Christian, was transferred to the *taluka*. This Christian *mamlatdar* was no other than a former Mahar. He understood the Mahars' agonies. It became embedded in his mind that he should give the Mahars justice.

Once a Mahar became a Christian, he no longer polluted a village. And if the Christian was an official, there was no question about it at

all. The whole village was alert to serve him. The Mahars met the *mamlatdar* and urged him to visit Dhamangaon and put an end to our problem. Today the *mamlatdar* of a *taluka* is treated as a person of no account, but those were the days of the British. The Christian *mamlatdar* agreed to visit the village. He announced, 'I will not stay in the village.' He called for the session to be held in the square in the Maharwada. It was the first time that a *mamlatdar* was to enter the Maharwada. They decorated the Maharwada with garlands and festive pots. They painted up the square. They welcomed the *mamlatdar* with music. They tied an expensive zari turban round his head. The Patil and the Talati of the village attempted to come into the Maharwada and offer hospitality to him. The meeting of the village elders that was called, took place in our square.

The villagers were mightily offended that the *mamlatdar* would not go to the village but came instead to the Maharwada. But if the king beats you or the rain pounds on you, whom will you ask for justice ? All of them quietly came to the Maharwada.

Four or five leaders of the village had cases filed against them. They all had to sign a letter of apology. It was taken in writing from the chief among them that they would no longer trouble the Mahars and would not close the road to them.

For a long time, Javjibuva kept this written statement in a tin cylinder, and guarded it with his life. Later on, when I was educated, Javjibuva used to take it out and show it to me; get me to read it to him.

He used to call it a'bond'. His chest would look swollen with pride. When he died, he left this gift for his son, as one might hand down the priceless legacy of a pot of gold mohurs.

Translated by Priya Adarkar
An extract from **Baluta**

SHANTABAI KAMBLE

Naja Goes to School—and Doesn't

One day the headmaster called me. 'We want to give you a scholarship. Go home and bring your father.' I went home immediately. Appa was about to take the bull out to graze. I said to him, 'Appa, the headmaster has called you to school. Come quickly.' He said,'Go, say I'll come tomorrow.'

'Appa, don't do that. I'm going to get money from the government.' As soon as I said this, he tied the bull to a peg. And he came with me straightaway. He said to the headmaster, 'Why have you called me?' The headmaster said,'Sakharam, we want to give your girl Rs 3 a month for paper, ink, notebooks and so on. You have to put your thumb on the application, so I called you.' 'Sir, this is a good thing you are doing.' So saying, Appa held out his thumb. The headmaster took his thumb impression on the paper. He said to Appa, 'Sakharam, don't keep the girl home. Send her to school every day.' And he said to me, 'Naja, you must study. If you fail, you won't get the money.'

So I worked with all my will. Appa said to Ai, 'The girl is now getting Rs 3 a month.' They were both happy. When I got the money I was happy, too.

I was to get the money till the seventh class. I was then in the sixth class. Shaku, the Brahmin's daughter, was in my class. I liked that because in the fifth class I had been the only girl. All the others were boys. One day Shaku didn't come to school. So the headmaster sent me to her house to fetch her. I went to Shaku's house. There were *rangolis* outside the door. Seeing me Shaku's Ai shouted,'You daughter of a Mahar; stay there. You'll trample the *rangolis*.'

I stood there scared. I said to her, 'Shaku's Ai, send Shaku to school.' Shaku's Ai said to Shaku straightaway, 'Shaku, the Mahar's daughter is calling you. Go quickly to school.'

Shaku and I came to school but her mother's words were humming in my ears.

'You daughter of a Mahar! Stay there.'

When we came to school the headmaster said, 'Children, study hard, the exam is coming.' So we began to study hard.

Seven days after Gudi Padwa was the village Urus. The same day Bhonde Saheb came to examine the children. We had a holiday for the village Urus.

Saheb said to the headmaster, 'Call the children to school.' The children were immediately called to school. All the children came because it was the annual exam. The exam began. Saheb gave us three sums to do on our slates. I could do two of them. Shaku couldn't do even one. She got them all wrong. Saheb asked all the other questions orally. He finished examining the whole class. Two days later they told us who had passed and who had failed. I passed. Shaku failed. Now I would be alone again in the seventh class. I was feeling very sad. But what could I do?

'I've passed,' I told Ai and Appa. They were very happy. Ai said to me, 'I got three daughters one after the other; and then I delivered again. When the baby's voice was heard, your father asked your granny — "Granny, has she delivered?"

'Granny said, "Yes, Sakha."

'"What is it?"

'"A girl again."

'Appa said, "All bloody girls. Granny, hand over that girl. And give me the pick and the shovel. I'll go bury her."

'Now that girl has passed the sixth and gone into the seventh.'

Appa heard this and he began laughing.

'She's a good girl. Two sons came after her. She is a fortunate girl!' He hugged me. Stroking my back he said, 'Study hard now in the seventh.'

'I'll study hard,' I told Appa.

I was now in the seventh.

Jalinder, my nephew, he was also in the seventh. Every day we used to go to school together.

Headmaster Patil was transferred. Headmaster Kadam came in his place.

Headmaster Kadam sent for me. And he said, 'Naja, this is an agricultural school. You'll have to do carpentry, iron-work, rope-work. And you'll have to go out to the fields to observe the crops. I don't think you can cope. You'd best go with an application to the girls' school in Pandharpur. You're the only girl in this class.'

When school was over, I came home and said to Appa in a tearful

voice, 'Headmaster Kadam says to me you won't be able to study in the agricultural school. Go with your application to the girls' school in Pandharpur.' Appa said to me, 'Naja, we have no food to eat. We are the poorest of the poor. We know nobody in Pandharpur. How can you go to school in Pandharpur? Forget school now.'

I felt very sad when Appa said this. Schoolmaster had said don't study here. Go to Pandharpur. There was no money to study in Pandharpur. Now I had to forget school. And so, I stayed at home.

When I saw other children go to school I felt bad that I couldn't go. Appa used to say, 'Naja, I too feel very bad that you have to stop school halfway.'

* * *

Akka's daughter Gomi was married into Pilwa. One morning she quietly walked back to Mahud.

Akka said to Gomi, 'Gomi, who have you come with?'

She said, 'I've come alone. Ma-in-law harasses me.'

Akka said, 'Where is your husband?'

'He's there. If there's work, he does it, otherwise he's idle. I came back because I'm fed up with the work. Aye, I'm not going back.'

Her mother-in-law, wondering why Gomi hadn't come home, looked for her here and there. She said to her son, 'Deva, see if your wife has gone off to Mahud.'

He came to Mahud. Goda was sitting in the doorway. Deva saw her, 'Your daughter came away without telling anybody. Send her back with me now.'

Akka said, 'You are making Gomi work like an animal and your mother doesn't give her enough to eat. We don't want to send her back.'

Akka sent her Sheela over home to us. Sheela said to my mother, 'Granny, my mother's calling you, come.'

Ai said, 'Why did you call me, Buka?'

Akka said to Ai, 'Mother, Gomi's come home without a word from Pilwa. And her husband's come after her to take her home. He says send Gomi with me.'

'Why have you come?' mother asked. Gomi said, 'My mother-in-law doesn't give me food. How long do I starve and work? So I came.' My mother said to Gomi's husband,

'What do you say, son? Why doesn't your mother give our girl food?' Deva said, 'My mother was telling some lies.' My mother said, 'Deva just look at the girl! How ghastly she's looking. I'm not sending

the girl. Do what you like.'

Deva returned to Pilwa.

Deva brought four men from Pilwa to take Gomi back. They came and sat in the square. My sister was married into Pilwa. Her husband — my brother-in-law — had also come.

Brother-in-law said to our Appa, 'How did you keep your grand-daughter when she came away without telling anybody?'

Appa said to brother-in-law, 'The girl's husband doesn't look after her properly. Her mother-in-law doesn't feed her.' Another man said, 'We'll tell Deva to tell his mother to treat her properly. But send the girl back.'

Kisnatatya said, 'Send the girl back.'

My brother-in-law said, 'We're not sending the girl back.'

The people gathered in the square returned home.

Translated by Shanta Gokhale
An extract from Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha

KUMUD PAWDE

The Story of My 'Sanskrit'

A lot of things are often said about me to my face. I've grown used to listening to them quietly; it's become a habit. What I have to listen to is praise. Actually, I don't at all like listening to praise. You may say that this itself is a form of self-indulgence. But that isn't so. I mean it sincerely. When I hear myself praised, it's like being stung by a lot of gadflies. As a result, I look askance at the person praising me. This expression must look like annoyance at being praised, for many misunderstandings have arisen about me in this connection. But it can't be helped. My acquaintances get angry with me because I am unable to accept compliments gracefully. I appear ill-mannered to them, because there isn't in me the courtesy they are expecting.

Now if you want to know why I am praised — well, it's for my knowledge of Sanskrit, my ability to learn it and to teach it. Doesn't anyone ever learn Sanskrit? That's not the point. The point is that Sanskrit and the social group I come from, don't go together in the Indian mind. Against the background of my caste, the Sanskrit I have learned appears shockingly strange.

That a woman from a caste that is the lowest of the low should learn Sanskrit, and not only that, also teach it — is a dreadful anomaly to a traditional mind. And an individual in whose personality these anomalies are accumulated becomes an object of attraction — an attraction blended of mixed acceptance and rejection. The attraction based on acceptance comes from my caste-fellows, in the admiration of whose glance is pride in an impossible achievement. That which for so many centuries was not to be touched by us, is now within our grasp. That which remained encased in the shell of difficulty, is now accessible. Seeing this knowledge hidden in the esoteric inner sanctum come within the embrace, not just of any person, but one whom religion has considered to be vermin — that is their victory.

The other attraction — based on rejection — is devastating. It pricks holes in one's mind — turning a sensitive heart into a sieve.

Words of praise of this kind, for someone who is aware, are like hot spears. It is fulsome praise. Words that come out from lips' edge as filthy as betel-stained spit. Each word gleaming smooth as cream. Made up of the fragility of a honey-filled *shirish*-blossom. Polished as marble. The sensation is that of walking on a soft velvety carpet — but being burnt by the hot embers hidden in someone's breast, and feeling the scorching pain in one's soul. The one who's speaking thinks the listener can't understand — for surely a low-caste person hasn't the ability to comprehend. But some people intend to be understood, so that I'll be crushed by the words. 'Well, isn't that amazing! So you're teaching Sanskrit at the Government College, are you? That's very gratifying, I must say.' The words are quite ordinary; their literal meaning is straight-forward. But the meaning conveyed by the tone in which they are said torments me in many different ways! 'In what former life have I committed a sin that I should have to learn Sanskrit even from you?' 'All our sacred scriptures have been polluted.' Some despair is also conveyed by their facial expressions. 'It's all over! *Kaliyug* has dawned. After all, they're the government's favourite sons-in-law! We have to accept it all.'

There are some other people I know, who have a genuine regard for me. They are honestly amazed by how I talk, by my clean, clear pronunciation. They speak with affectionate admiration about my mode of living. The food I cook is equated with ambrosia. They detect a Brahminical standard of culture in my every thought and action — enough to surprise them. They constantly try to reconcile the contradiction. It's my good luck that I'm not always being asked to account for my antecedents, like Satyakam Jabali. The main point is that they are trying to understand my evident good breeding in the context of my caste, and that is what makes everything so novel for them.

The result is that although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression I heard somewhere: 'What comes by birth, but can't be cast off by dying — that is caste.'

Beyond the accepters and the rejecters lies yet another group. In wholeheartedly welcoming the admiration of this group, every corner of my being is filled with pleasure. This group consists of my students. Far removed from hostile feelings. Without even an iota of caste consciousness. Away from the prejudices of their elders. Pure, innocent admiration, prompted by the boundless respect they feel, fills their eyes. Actually these girls have reached the age of

understanding. The opinions they hear around them should by rights have made an impression on their mind. But these precious girls are full to the brim with the ability to discriminate impartially. And they keep their admiration within the limits of their gaze; they do not allow it to reach their lips. And that's why I yearn for that admiration. The occasional forward girl who has suppressed her timidity makes bold to express her feelings. 'Madam, I wish your lesson would never end!' And I answer her woodenly: 'But the college doesn't feel that way.' She feels snubbed, but I don't wish to encourage her admiration, in case it becomes a habit.

If the admiration had stayed limited to this individual level, I would tolerate it, but it goes beyond the prescribed boundaries. In other words, it starts to be blazoned even at the official level. As usual they start beating the drum of my caste, and tunes of praise of my knowledge of Sanskrit begin to mingle with the drumbeat. On the Vijaya Dashami day of 1971, the Maharashtra State Government arranged, at Nagpur, a felicitation meeting to honour scholars of the Vedas. According to the wishes of the Honourable ex-Minister of Education, Shri Madhukarrao Chaudhary, I was to introduce these honoured scholars. Of course the inspiration was that of Dr Kolte. The introduction was to be made in Sanskrit. 'In the times of the Aryans it was noted down, and moreover impressed on the minds of the common Indian people, from the Himalayas to the tip of the peninsula, that my ancestors should consider themselves guilty of a crime if they even heard the sound of this language. And that is the language in which I have to speak.' My God! How I was I going to manage? My heart began to beat rapidly. My mind was dark with anxiety, and I was drowned in feelings of inferiority. A conflict of emotions — and once again a confrontation with public praise. 'Whereas our traditional books have forbidden the study of Sanskrit by women and Shudras, a woman from those very Shudras, from the lowest caste among them, will today, in Sanskrit, introduce these scholars. This is the beginning of a progressive way of thinking in independent India.' A thunder of applause. I look towards the sound of the applause. Most of the people here are from the government offices. Looking at them through an artist's eyes, I see what looks like a wild disco-dance of different emotions. The frustration of the defeated, the fury of the traditionalists, the respect of some acquaintances, the hostility and disgust of others, are obvious to my experienced eye. Some gazes ask me, 'Why did you need to make the

introductions in this manner? To humiliate us?'

In response to these hissings of wounded pride, I experience a mixture of emotions. Seeing this hostility and disgust, I slip into the past. This disgust is extremely familiar to me. In fact, that is what I have grown accustomed to, ever since I was old enough to understand. Actually, I shouldn't have any feelings about this disgust, and if I do have any feelings at all, they should be of gratitude. For it was this disgust that inclined me towards Sanskrit. It so happened that the ghetto in which there stood my place of birth, the house where I was welcome, was encircled on all sides by the houses of caste Hindus. The people in our ghetto referred to them as the Splendid People. A small girl like me, seven or eight years old, could not understand why they called them 'Splendid'. And even as today's mature female with learning from innumerable books, I still cannot understand it. That is, I have understood the literal meaning of the word 'splendid'. But not why it should be applied to them, or whether they deserve to have it applied. The girls who studied along with me were Brahmins or from other higher castes. I had to pass their houses. I paused, waiting casually for their company. Right in front of me, the mothers would warn their daughters, 'Be careful! Don't touch her. Stay away from her. And don't play with her. Or I won't let you into the house again.' Those so-called educated, civilized mothers were probably unconscious of the effect of this on my young mind. It wasn't as if I could not understand them.

Every day, I bathed myself clean with Pears soap. My mother rubbed Kaminia oil on my hair, and plaited it neatly. My clothes were well-washed and sparkling clean. The girls of my own caste liked to play with me because it enabled them to smell some fragrance. For my father himself was fond of toiletries. So there was always a variety of oils, soaps and perfumes in the house. The other girls in my class (except for those who lived near my ghetto) also liked to sit next to me. So why should these women have talked like that?

What's more, if one were to compare houses, our house was cleaner than theirs. My mother daily smeared the floor with fresh cowdung. The white-powder borders were delicately drawn. The courtyard was well-sprinkled, and decorated with *rangoli* designs. Almost every fortnight, on the occasion of a festival, the house was whitewashed from top to bottom. Every scrap of cloth was boiled in a solution of soda bicarb before it was washed. The metal vessels were scrubbed to gleaming. On the other hand, one could see water stains and a greasy

film on even the drinking-vessels those girls had. In fact, it was I who didn't like to sit next to those girls. For, from my childhood, my sense-organs had been sharp and vigorous. My sense of smell, in particular, had sharpened beyond limit. Though, of course, the nose that conveyed it was broad and misshapen. The sour smell, like buttermilk, that rose from the bodies of those girls! I couldn't bear the smell of *shikakai* mixed with the smell of their hair. Their bad breath, too, was unbearable. And, in spite of all this, *they* found *me* disgusting? So, even at that young age, this emotion of disgust taught me to think. It inspired me to be introspective. At an age which was meant for playing and skipping around, these thoughts would rouse me to fury.

One event outraged my self-respect. There was to be a thread-ceremony for the brother of one of my classmates. I had not actually been invited but my restless curiosity would not let me sit quiet. I stood outside the *pandal* looking in at the ceremony going on inside. The sacrificial fire was lit; the air all around was filled with the smoke and fragrance of incense and the grain burnt-offering. The reverberations of the Vedic chants threatened to burst through the cloth walls of the *pandal*. I was lost in watching the head-movements that accompanied the chant of 'Svaha!' each time a libation was poured. All this was extremely new, unknown, never seen before. I was totally engrossed, at one with the chants and the incense.

My concentration was suddenly broken. One voice: 'Hey, girl! What are you staring at? Can you make head or tail of it? Here, take a *ladoo* — and be off!' A decked-up woman past her prime, dripping with gold and pearls, stood in front of me, adjusting the *pallav* of her heavily-brocaded sari. Her nose was wrinkled in disgust, like a shrivelled fig. 'What do you take me for — a beggar? Giving me a *ladoo!* Can you see injuries on anyone just because I watched them?' I retorted, and briskly walked away.

Words followed me: 'These Mahars have really got above themselves.' The intonation was the typical superior nasal tone of the Pune Brahmin.

My young mind thought, 'Why was I so wrapped up in watching? What had that ceremony to do with me? And why should that woman behave so bitchily with me?' There was definitely some intimate connection between me and those Vedic mantras. Otherewise why should that woman have noticed my innocent absorption? Why should she have taunted me disgustedly? She must have been unwilling to let

those chants enter my ears. I used to ask my father, 'What language are the Vedic mantras composed in?' He used to say, 'They're in Sanskrit, my girl.' 'Is Sanskrit very difficult? Can't we learn it?' My father used to answer, 'Why shouldn't we? After all, we're independent now. Those days are gone. Learn Sanskrit. Don't I too know the Gayatri mantra?' And he used to say 'Om' and begin to recite the Gayatri mantra. In simple delight, I used to tell my neighbours, 'I'm going to learn Sanskrit.' The educated people next door used to poke fun at me. 'Is Sanskrit such an easy langauge? It's very difficult. Did our forefathers ever learn it?' Hearing this, I would be discouraged. Seeing my crestfallen face, my father would start cursing those people, sometimes obscenely, sometimes more elegantly. He used to encourage me, and the encouragement would make me glow with confidence once again.

After I entered High School, I took Sanskrit as an elective subject in class nine. The school where I went supported Brahminical prejudices. All sorts of indirect efforts were systematically made to prevent me from learning Sanskrit. 'You won't be able to manage. There will be no one at home to help you. Sanskrit is very difficult,' etc., etc. But I was as firm as a rock. Seeing that no form of persuasion had any effect on me, the persuaders stopped persuading. But how to remove the prejudice in their minds? I did not want to pay heed to every single opinion. I just wanted to keep my teacher, Hatekar, happy. He had been full of praise of me since I was in class six. 'How can this little slip of a girl give answers so fast in every subject?' I asked him, 'Sir, I should take Sanskrit, shouldn't I?' 'Do take it. But you've taken all the Arts subjects, though you're good at maths. Take science and maths, along with Sanskrit.' 'But sir, I don't enjoy maths.' 'But you can become a doctor, can't you?' 'I don't want to be a doctor. I can't bear suffering.' He laughed and said, 'On the contrary, it is precisely those who can't bear suffering, who are fit to become doctors. Won't you be able to help the afflicted? That's what's needed among your people. But it's your decision.'

With great eagerness and interest, I began my study of Sanskrit. As I learnt the first-declension masculine form of the word 'deva', I picked up the rhythm of the chant. I must make special mention of the person who helped me to learn by rote the first lesson about aspirates — my teacher Gokhale. If I omit to do so, I shall feel a twinge of disloyalty in every drop of my blood. Gokhale Guruji. Dhoti, long-sleeved shirt, black cap, a sandalwood-paste mark on his

forehead. The typical robust and clear pronunciation of the Vedic school. And an incredible concern for getting his students to learn Sanskrit. At first I was afraid. But this proved groundless. What actually happened was the very opposite of what I had expected.

I had been sent by the Bhide Kanya Shala to take part in some essay competition or the other. The centre for the competition was the Bhonsale Vedic School. No part of the Mahal area was familiar to me. I timidly explained my difficulty to Gokhale Guruji. He said, 'Why don't you come to my house? [He never addressed us in the second person singular; it was always a respectful plural.] I'll take you along.' And he gave me his address. I reached the address asking for directions repeatedly in the lanes and alleys of the Mahal area. My teacher's house was in fact a sprawling mansion. A huge, well-swept courtyard with a *tulsi vrindavan* and a well, and a small Shiva temple within it. All looked as antique as a well-preserved old Benares brocade. I hesitantly entered. 'Welcome,' he greeted me in friendly tones. Two boys, aged about ten or eleven years old, came out to see who had arrived. From their general appearance — the dhoti, shirt, top-knot and sandalwood mark, as well as their features — they appeared to be Guruji's children. After a while, on being called by Guruji, his wife came outside. She was dressed in silk for ritual purity. Her face brimmed with godliness. Every movement of her body was eloquent with hospitality. The formalities of introduction were completed. She hurried inside, and after a while, the older boy came out bearing plates full of cooked *poha*. I became nervous, fear crept over my mind. Suppose this lady were to find out my caste? Along with sips of water, I swallowed the lump in my throat as well as mouthfuls of *poha*. I couldn't concentrate on what anyone was saying. My only worry was when and how I could escape from there. Suppose someone from the Buldy area were to come there?

'God deliver me from this ordeal!' I kept praying to the Almighty. But nothing terrible happened. For those people were indeed very kind. Open and relaxed in their conversation. My teacher, for one, definitely knew my caste. But I was not made to experience any feeling of inferiority. And I felt a profound respect for him. The broadmindedness of this Brahmin incarnate, with his old-fashioned upbringing, remained constant even towards a student of the very lowest caste. Needless to say, it was evidence of his high thinking and his generous heart. It became my aim to study faithfully as my teacher instructed me and never to anger him by inattention to studies. You

can never tell who will become a shining light to whose life. Guruji was probably unaware that he had the power to add a touch of glory to the life of an insignificant being. After I matriculated, I did not meet him again. Perhaps he won't even recognize me. But I wish to lighten my load of respect by paying back a fraction of my sacred debt with the fee of words. For if Guruji had not shown me that warmth, but had instead shown the base feelings appropriate to his orthodox nature, would I have learnt Sanskrit?

Against all obstacles, I at last matriculated. On seeing the marks I got for Sanskrit, I announced, 'I shall do an M.A. in Sanskrit.' Our enlightened neighbours laughed as they had before. Some college lecturers and lawyers also joined in the joke. 'How can that be possible? You may have got good marks at Matric. But it isn't so easy to do an M.A. in Sanskrit. You shouldn't make meaningless boasts; you should know your limitations.' The discouragers said what they usually do. The point was that the people who discouraged me were all of my caste. But their words could not turn me from my purpose. I didn't reply — I wanted to answer them by action. For that, I needed to study very hard. In order to take an M.A. in Sanskrit, I would have to go to the famous Morris College. I had heard so many things about the college from my friend's sister. About the learned professors with their cultivated tastes, about the mischievous male students, the beautiful girls, and the huge library. My interest was limited to the professors who would teach me, and to the library. And I joined the college.

The Hindus from the high-caste areas used to taunt me. 'Even these wretched outcastes are giving themselves airs these days — studying in colleges.' I pretended to be deaf. I had begun to have some idea of what Savitribai Phule must have had to endure on account of her husband Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's zeal for women's education.

I went through some mixed experiences while I studied. I would call my lecturers' even-handed fairness a very remarkable thing. I was never scared by the prejudice of which repute and rumour had told me. What is more, praise and encouragement were given according to merit. Some people may have felt dislike in their heart of hearts, but they never displayed it. One thing alone irked me — the ironical comments about the scholarship I got. 'She's having fun and games at the expense of a scholarship. Just bloated with government money!' From the peons themselves to the senior officials, there was the same attitude. I couldn't understand. Was it charity they were dispensing

from their personal coffers? They were giving me government money, and if that money was going from them to the government in the form of taxes, then equally, a tax was being levied on the public to pay their salaries. And that tax was collected in indirect forms even from the parents of the scholarship holders. So who paid whom? When the Dakshina Prize Committee used to give stipends, there was no complaint of any kind from any level of society. Then why now? Oh, well.

I passed my B.A. The figures in my B.A. mark-sheet were worthy of high praise. I had got good marks without falling behind in any way. Not only did I have respect for my teachers' fairness, but it made me happy too. But in human life, no joy is unmixed. It can't be attained fully without some little blemish. So now, the story of my M.A.

In the second year of our M.A. we went to the Postgraduate Department in the University. Very well-known scholars taught us there. The Head of the Department was a scholar of all-India repute. He didn't like my learning Sanskrit, and would make it clear that he didn't. And he took a malicious delight in doing so. The sharp claws of his taunts left my mind wounded and bleeding. In a way, I had developed a terror of this great pandit. His manner of speaking was honeyed and reasonable, but filled with venom. I would unconsciously compare him with Gokhale Guruji. I couldn't understand why this great man with a doctorate, so renowned all over India, this man in his modern dress, who did not wear the traditional cap, who could so eloquently delineate the philosophy of the Universal Being, and with such ease explain difficult concepts in simple terms, could not practise in real life the philosophy in the books he taught. This man had been exposed to modernity; Gokhale Guruji was orthodox. Yet one had been shrivelled by tradition, the other enriched by it, like a tree weighed down with fruit. Days go by; you survive calamities; but the memory of them sets up its permanent abode in you. In the inmost recesses of your inner being. I survived even through such a difficult ordeal. I got my M.A. with distinction.

A congratulatory bouquet of colourful, fragrant flowers came from Professor (Dr) Kolte, the former Vice-Chancellor of Nagpur University. I stared at it unblinkingly. In those flowers, I could see Dr Kolte's heart blossoming, petal by petal, with pride. And smell the sweet fragrance of unalloyed joy, thrilling my senses and arousing my self-confidence.

And now I would be a lecturer in Sanskrit! My dreams were tinted with turquoise and edged in gold. The images I nursed about myself were taking strange shapes in my mind.

A high-paid job would come to me on a platter from the government. For I must have been the first woman from a scheduled caste to pass with distinction in Sanskrit. Every nook and cranny of my mind was filled with such hopes and expectations. But those ideas were shattered. My illusions proved as worthless as chaff. I became despondent about the efficiency of the government. I started attending interviews in private colleges. And that was a complete farce. Some said, 'But how will you stay on with us, when you've passed so well?' (In other words, they must have wanted to say, 'How will you work for less pay?') In other places, the moment I had been interviewed and stepped out of the room, there would be a burst of derisive laughter. I would hear words like sharp needles: 'So now even these people are to teach Sanskrit! Government Brahmins, aren't they?' And the ones who said this weren't even Brahmins, but so-called reformers from the lower castes, who considered themselves anti-Brahmin, and talked of the heritage of Jyotiba Phule, and flogged the mass of the lower castes for their narrow caste-consciousness. And yet they found it distasteful that a girl from the Mahar caste, which was one of the lower castes, should teach Sanskrit. When people like these, wearing hypocritical masks, are in responsible positions in society, it does not take even a minute for that society to fall.

Two years after my M.A., I was still unemployed. There must be many whose position is the same as mine. In my frustration I took a bold step to get out of the trap. I presented my case in writing to the Honourable Shri Jagjivan Ram, the noted Minister in the Central Cabinet. I condemned the flimsy pretence of the state government and the administration that flouted the Constitution. My words had all the power of a sharp sword. For they were a cry from the heart of a person being crushed to death under the wheels of circumstance — like the screeching of the eagle Jatayu in his last struggles.

The Honourable Minister Jagjivan Ram placed the letter before Pandit Nehru, who was astonished by it, and sent me an award of Rs.250/-, telling me to meet the Chief Minister of Maharashtra. Accordingly the Chief Minister of that time, Yeshwantrao Chavan, sent me a telegram asking me to meet him. Within a day or two, one wire after another had electrified me into wondering who I'd suddenly become. Getting past the ranks of spearmen and macebearers at the

government office was quite an ordeal. But finally I got to see the 'Saheb'. Now, I thought, I would get a job at once — as a clerk in the government office, at least. A naive expectation. The Chief Minister made me fulsome promises in his own style. 'We'll definitely make efforts for you — but you won't get a job in minutes; it'll take us some time. We'll have to give thought to it; have to hunt out something.'

And with this assurance came a fine speech that qualified as an example of literature. 'A student of Sanskrit is intoxicated with idealism. It is a deeply felt personal desire. You shouldn't run after a job. Involve yourself in research. Pursue your studies.' Now the controls of endurance that restrained me started to break rapidly, and the words that had been bound within me broke out. 'Saheb, if you can't give me a job, tell me so, clearly. I don't want promises. Promises keep false hopes alive. Research is the fruit of mental peace. How do you expect me to have mental peace, when I am starving? And I'm tired of speeches.' I was fed up with life. Otherwise in A.D. 1960 it would have been impossible for a wretch like me even to stand before a dignitary like this, with all the power of *kartumakartumanyathakartum*, 'to do, omit to do, or do in another way', let alone speak out to him.

Waiting for a job, I passed the first year of an M.A. in English Literature. It was just an excuse to keep myself occupied. That year I got married — an intercaste marriage. That is a story by itself — a different glimpse of the nature of Indian society. Let that be the subject of another story. The surprising thing is that two months after my marriage, I got an Assistant Lecturership in a government college. Deputy Director Sahastrabuddhe, who was on the interview board, was amazed. 'How did this girl remain unemployed for two years?' Dr Kolte's good will remained a constant support here, too. Today, I am a professor in the famous college where I studied, whose very walls are imbued with the respect I felt for that institution. But one thought still pricks me: the credit for Kumud Somkuwar's job is not hers, but that of the name Kumud Pawde. I hear that a woman's surname changes to match her husband's — and so does her caste. That's why I say that the credit of being a professor of Sanskrit is that of the presumed higher caste status of Mrs Kumud Pawde. The caste of her maiden status remains deprived.

Translated by Priya Adarkar
An extract from Antasphot

SHANKARRAO KHARAT

The Bone Merchant

When I was at school in the village I was always short of money. I'd been getting a scholarship of one rupee a month since class four. But that was spent daily on salt and spice and I could never save even a copper coin from it. Then I would collect gum from the jungle and sell it to a vendor. In summer I picked the fruit of the *karanja* tree and sold it in the market or hunted out honeycombs and sold the honey. Sometimes I worked on daily wages — anything to get some money. Or there would not have been a single coin in my hand.

After my mid-day meal, I went to the meeting place of the Maharwada and sat on the platform under the *peepul* tree. It was well past eleven and the sun was hot. My classmates from school had laid out a game of marbles under the shade of the *neem* tree nearby. 'Here comes the bone-man! The bone-man's here!' At the sound of these words everyone looked around sharply. I looked, puzzled, from one side to another. By that time all the children of the Mahars and Mangs had started searching for bones by the side of the stream near the platform. They ran around picking up whatever bones they could find. I became alert; so did my schoolmates.

The bone merchant used to visit our village to buy the bones of dead animals. He used to halt under the lime tree near the meeting place. If you wandered around and collected a bagful of bones, he would weigh them and pay you a few small coins. But in those days even those small coins went a long way. And the bone merchant was honest in his dealings. He would weigh the bones and pay for them immediately. All the Mahar and Mang men, women and children of the village used to jump at the call, 'The bone-man's here' and start looking for bones far and wide to sell them to the bone merchant. The Mahars of my village had stopped eating meat from carcasses. So entire skeletons of dead animals were left lying around by the side of the stream. And when the bone merchant came, once in a while, the search for bones would begin. Some old Mahars who were aware of

this would collect and store bones in the backyards of their houses. On these rare moments, they got a chance to sell them. They would earn an easy rupee or two which would see them through another week.

Hope flared in me when I heard the bone merchant announced. Dagdu and I moved immediately to search for bones. We decided to bring in the skeletons lying near the stream. As we started, old Sawala shouted at us, 'You brats! Don't go near my backyard! And don't pick up the bones I've collected. I know those bones well!' Sawala Mahar was right. There was a heap of bones in his backyard. Sometimes crows used to sit on fresh bones and peck at the flesh. Kites glided above them. Sometimes the rotting bones gave off a foul smell, and people would hold their noses as they passed. The bones dried in the hot sun and as they dried, the foul smell would go away. Sometimes a hungry stray dog would sit there chewing contentedly at the bones.

Sawala Mahar was always on the lookout for bones. If he found any lying around he would bring them home and store them in his backyard. Shiva Mahar did the same. Bones lay in heaps behind their houses. For Sawala, this was a regular business. Once every few months when the bone merchant came he would get two rupees in exchange for two or three gunnybags of bones — an easy income for him. With those two rupees he could buy a new shirt, and a single rough dhoti. He would discard the rags he had ben wearing. The bone merchant's visit gave him new clothes. That's why he looked out for bones and warned us off when he saw us moving to collect them.

The moment they heard that the bone merchant had come Sawala and Shiva Mahar looked radiant. Sawala moved quickly, climbed down the steps and ran towards his house like a hound on the scent. And Shiva Mahar, with a smiling face, hurried to his house at a brisk totter.

Panda and I ran through the bylanes of the Maharwada. But we met on our way some women and children coming towards us with baskets full of bones. Now it would be difficult to lay our hands on any bones in the Maharwada. So, along with Dagdu, I ran towards the stream. I knew where the skeletons were lying because I used to take the goats out to graze there. As we went along, Panda said,

'Shankar! there is a skeleton near the slope!'

'Yes, I know that!' I said and broke some further news to him. 'I saw a buffalo skeleton under the *karanja* tree.'

'I don't know about that.'

But I did. 'Panda! There are skeletons in the cemetery as well!'

He was doubtful. 'Whose skeletons? Animals' or dead people's?'

'Who the hell knows?' I replied. 'But there are a lot of bones in the cemetery!'

'They must be human bones!'

'So what? Bones are bones! As long as we get some money for it.'

'True,' agreed Panda.

As we talked, we were scampering towards the stream. Dagdu also came running behind us.

'Wait! Let me come with you!' He came right up to us and said, 'Hey pals! Let's all three collect bones together!'

I remained silent.

But Panda agreed. 'All right! We'll all do it together.' So I nodded and said, 'All right. If it's three, it's three. We'll collect the bones together and share the money between us.' We quickly ran to the other side of the stream and gathered bones lying on the slope. Seeing us collecting the bones crows began to chase us and kites hovered over our heads. And seeing the kites and the crows above us dogs started to follow us, the smell of the bones in their nostrils.

We were absorbed in collecting bones. Suddenly a kite swooped down on the bone in my hand. Its sharp talons stabbed at my hand and a little blood came out. I wiped off the blood and went on collecting bones. Between the three of us we collected a lot of them.

Dagdu said, 'Shankar! Tie these bones into a bundle and put it on my head. I'll run to the bone-man with it.'

It was a good idea. We tied together all the bones we collected and lifted the load onto Dagdu's head. He set off to the meeting place, his feet crunching the gravel of the stream. Then Panda and I ran towards the high bank. Ahead of us Dama was moving fast in the same direction, his eyes fixed on the bank. We were young and agile; we bounded ahead of him through the sand like lambs. We ran past him. We had no idea what he was thinking. As we ran we soon left him far behind. We ran up and caught hold of the big skeleton of an ox. I was delighted to see it. At a sudden breeze, some bluish purple buds from the *karanja* tree fell on my body, and some fell on the skeleton. The skeleton's teeth grinned at us. Its sockets were empty. The hooves and horns were intact. We were very happy; the bone merchant would give us at least a few annas for the skeletons. I caught hold of its rear hooves. Panda grasped its horns. And we swung up the skeleton between us. We set off, one at either end of it. Suddenly Dama Mahar

charged upon us, shouting. Glaring at us, he yelled, 'You rogues! It's my skeleton! Where are you taking it? I won't let you!'

Now here was a dilemma.

I said, 'But we were the first to catch hold of it!'

'You fools, is it your father's property?'

'Is it your property?' I retorted.

Immediately Dama started laying claim with the words, 'Even if it's not my property, it is my share as a Mahar. When the ox died, I dragged it here. You thought it was easy pickings, didn't you?'

And he charged at us. He caught hold of the front legs of the bull and started pulling, we pulled yet hard. The tug-of-war developed into a fight. As we tugged, he came at us to beat us. But we were too canny to let go of the skeleton. Just then Galpa from our Maharwada came by us from his field. Hearing us fight he came up to us and said, 'Why are you fighting for bones like dogs?' And he shouted at Dama, 'You too, Dama! You're behaving like a child! Fighting for bones!'

Dama said, 'But the skeleton's mine!'

'Is it your father's?'

'No, but that dead ox was my share.'

'Then you should have taken the bones at that time.'

'That's true, but...'

'But why must you have it right now?'

Dama told him the truth, 'The bone-man's come to the Maharwada. That's why!'

'Oh! So the bone-man's come!'

'Yes! He's come!'

'Then share it between you. Let these boys too earn something from it,' he offered as a compromise.

Then he yelled at us, 'Boys! Share this skeleton with Dama, half for him, half for you. Let him get a few annas too for his salt and spice.'

We agreed.

Dama stepped up and put his foot on the skeleton's spine. The bone broke like dry wood. Then we started fighting over the horns. In the end Dama got the half with the horns. We got the rear end. Dama took his half of the skeleton on his head and started out. His skin was black; walking by himself in the blazing sun with those horns on his head, he looked like a demon. And walked like one too.

Our load was now reduced. Dama had taken half of what we had. I said, 'Panda! You take this on your head! I'll see if I can get some

bones in the cemetery and bring them along!'

Panda nodded. He took the half skéleton on his head and started out for the Maharwada. I went straight to the cemetery, to see if there were some bones. There were tombs all around. A large, long stone was placed over each dead body. I saw a few bones at one side. They were long bones, parts of a leg. I picked them up and moved ahead. Then I found some small bones. I gathered together some arm bones and leg bones and skulls, tied them with a rope and set out towards the meeting place. There was a big crowd of people, young and old, men, women and children, surrounding the bone merchant under the shade of the lime tree.

I went up to the bone merchant. He had set up a scale to weigh the bones. As he weighed the bones he paid out the money as agreed. The people's faces bloomed with joy as the money was put into their hands. With his small eyes, Dama was counting the coins he had received. His face too glowed with satisfaction. Then we put our bones into the scales, which sagged under the weight. The bone merchant put heavier and heavier weights in the opposite scale.

The scales evened out. Examining the weights the bone merchant put his hand in his jingling purse. 'Twelve annas,' he said and gave the money to Panda. We were very pleased. At last he put into the scale the bones I had collected. Looking narrowly at the bones he growled at me, 'What bones are these, boy?'

'What d'you mean? They're bones, aren't they?'

'Child, you want us to go to jail?'

'That means?' I said, surprise breaking out.

The people around started looking in astonishment from him to me and back again. I couldn't understand what the bone merchant meant.

So he said explicitly, 'Child! these bones aren't from animals! The bones you brought belong to human beings!'

Human bones! Everyone came to attention. Some jerked. Some started. And startled, I stared at the bones. The bone merchant said to me again, 'You want to send us to jail? Pick up these bones at once!' And he added, 'Put them back where you found them. Go! Run! Otherwise the police will catch you too!'

When the bone merchant said this, I trembled where I stood. I quickly picked up the bones from the scale, tied them together and ran fast towards the cemetery. I scattered all the bones and then ran back panting. I was totally out of breath.

I went towards Panda who was standing by the platform. He put

my share of four annas in my hand. I was thrilled at the sight of the coins in my palm. Clenching my fist around the money I went home leaping with joy and gave the money to my mother.

Looking at me in surprise she asked, 'Where did you get this money?'

'I sold some bones to the bone-man and got it.'

'Then let's keep it aside for you to buy something to eat in the market.' And she put away the money in a small jar in a pile of pots. I ran back to the meeting place, jumping gleefully.

Translated by Priya Adarkar
An extract from Taral-Antaral

SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE

The Bastard

I was at that tender age when the milk in my veins hadn't yet turned to blood. An age to eat, drink and be merry, but those days I had fallen prey to vices. I smoked *bidis* and cigarette butts, ran after girls, bathed every day, brushed my teeth and washed myself after a shit.

Our Mahar tenement was made up of over a hundred houses. There were some ten boys my age and seven or eight girls, all under age. I had taken a fancy to Shevanta. Her house had such a desolate look, it would break my heart. The scorching sun, a few dogs, dull-faced boys, an old hag puffing at a *bidi*, ruins of ancient houses, a drunkard tottering on his way — with what else could I amuse myself? But once I made my acquaintance with Shevanta's eyes, even this desolation seemed golden.

Shevanta's mother took up any available work, but her father was an idler. Shevanta looked after the three younger children. About ten years old, she would start her monthly period in a year or two. When her mother went away to work, Shevanta did the baby-sitting. Her little brother was always tucked under her arm and her two little sisters tagged along with her, bawling all the time. Her parents left two *bhakris* for them for the whole day. But then, all the Mahars survived on as much, making do for the rest with large gulps of water.

Shevanta never smiled freely. She had no comforts — not even a drop of oil or water for her head — though she laboured like an ox yoked to an oil press. Shevanta's eyes had the same gentle timidity you see in the eyes of cattle. Her mother wore patched saris and her father's shirts were torn on the back. In the afternoons, Shevanta picked lice from her sisters' hair. I would stare at her — as if at an accident.

When Shevanta was home I sang and whistled at her. On hearing me she came out into the courtyard and made a show of washing utensils. If I went to the river, she followed me, and if she went there, I was not far behind. Otherwise I got restless. Shevanta reflected a

mirror into my eyes. I made signs to her, plucked tamarinds for her. We were getting involved with each other.

I was once taking a dip in the river, playing in the water, waiting for Shevanta. My body was dirty — the fish poked at me, tickling me. When I blew my nose, the fish gathered round the mucus. I scrubbed my body with a black stone. If I saw anybody rubbing soap into his clothes, I would remove mine to soak them in the lather. I helped him put out his clothes for drying, so that he let me use his lather. It was a pleasure washing clothes soaked in soapy water, for my shirt front was always dirty from wiping my nose and the slate.

The river water was full of frog-shit and huge lumps of moss. When I took a dip, I came up with moss on my head. I prayed fervently to God for Shevanta to come to the river.

Shevanta arrived. What was I to say to her? And how? I was scared of her, and a little sh too. We smiled at each other from a distance, but grew nervous on drawing near, our hearts aflutter. Pushing the moss aside, Shevanta filled water, filtering it with the fold of her sari. The sky fell into the water — I felt myself dissolving in it.

As Shevanta left, she turned to look at me and smiled. I smiled back and signalled to her to return. She nodded. I was so thrilled, I could have lifted the earth above my head and danced with joy. I felt like running about madly, with the sky under my feet.

Shevanta appeared again. I made up my mind to throw water on her, come what may. The waves lapped the shores, fanning my desires. My hair stood on end with nervous fear. As Shevanta entered the water, I splashed water all over her face, hair, body, as if I were showering flowers. I wanted to pick her up and bask in the sun with her, drench her, give free rein to my feelings. I wanted to fool around with her and take her behind the rainbow.

But Shevanta was alarmed. The water drops glistened like pearls as they trickled down her cheeks. Her eyes looked clearer than the river water. I felt like taking her lips between my palms and drinking from them. But Shevanta was upset. 'Don't throw water on me, Sharan, I don't have other clothes to wear.'

Even with cold water at its base, the sand grew hotter.

In our society, cheating is tolerated but not sins of the flesh. People at home came to know of my affair with Shevanta. Our love grew like a patch of V.D. Santamai promised to ask for Shevanta's hand in marriage. But how was that possible? I was a bastard. Santamai used to tell me the story of Uncle Rohidas. When Uncle Rohidas carried

off a woman form the Mahar tenement, the entire Maharwada was up in arms. They set out with sticks and axes as if to lynch a mad dog. Luckily Uncle Rohidas escaped. Santamai would be greatly agitated as she said, 'The Mahars are bitterly fanatic — they'll cut you into pieces. There's no one to support you — not a single bugger in this entire house. They'll screw us women. Forget Shevanta. You'll have all the Mahars after your blood if you marry a female from their community.'

★ ★ ★

Those were summer days, I think. I was still young and innocent but I was wise in many ways. Santamai and I bought liquor from Chungi at the rate of one and a quarter rupees for a bottle and sold it in the village at one and a half rupees. We also added *navsagar*, that is ammonium chloride, and water to it to increase the quantity. Gradually Santamai and Masamai began to operate the *bhattis* — the liquor stills — at home. They had separate *bhattis* and their customers, too, were different. They ran the business like men. The household survived on this business alone. One cup of liquor sold would take care of our morning tea. When there were no customers till the afternoon, we would swallow our own spittle, and wait eagerly for their arrival, as if waiting for God. We sold a cup of liquor at fifty paise; eight cups made a bottle, and six bottles made a gallon.

There were four liquor dens in our tenement — which belonged to Damunna, Mankunna, Hiramai and Kamlakka — besides ours. We stored jaggery and *navsagar* in large earthen pots and left them to ferment in water, stirring the mixture every day. On the seventh day we treated it in the *bhatti*.

It was like this. The jaggery mixture was heated in a tin covered with an earthen pot, with another pot inside and a brass pot on top. When the mixture boiled, the steam escaped to the earthen pot, the edges of which were sealed with cowdung. The brass pot held cold water to cool the steam, which collected in the liquid form in the pot inside the earthen pot. When the water in the brass pot grew hot, we changed it. After performing this operation seven times, we stopped the *bhatti*.

The liquor of the first pouring was very strong. The leftover waste was thrown into the gutter. The sweet, pungent smell filled our nostrils; but we were used to it.

There was a constant stream of customers. In our sleep, too, we could hear them blabbering and brawling. Often, when we ate, they

came and puked right before us. We got the stench and could see what they brought up. But we ate on. Mother cleaned up after them and showered abuse on them. But they sat on, heedless, without a trace of shame.

If a couple or two arrived together, they stayed for hours on end downing cup after cup. They would ask me for salt or send me to get salted gram from a shop. I ran errands for them. Sometimes they brought along *chiwda* and gave us a few grains. At times they tipped us ten paise. Making themselves comfortable, they spat all over the place, making mother wild. Sometimes they tried to take liberties with her, and Chandamai quarrelled with them.

Ever so often, when mother offered them the drink, I saw them grab her hand. I would think, what a business! When mother went out I looked after the sales and gave her all the money on her return. She gave me ten paise and a pat on the back. I felt good and wished that the business would grow in my hands.

We were always scared of the police. We hid the liquor in the garbage and kept watch over it as if guarding a field, taking out the stuff when we needed it. When the police came, we scuttled; they made surprise raids. We threw the liquor bottles into the garbage. Sometimes we poured out all the liquor into the washing place and cleaned it up with a bucketful of water. Or flung the liquor tubes over the roof. The police caught anyone they could lay their hands on.

Once the police surrounded the house of Mankunna and caught hold of him. There were just two bottles of liquor in the house — with these he struck the hand of a policeman like a schoolmaster caning a truant boy and made off. I decided to be as brave as Mankunna. When Mankunna was released from jail he respectfully touched the feet of the elders. All the Mahars asked after him. Mankunna cursed the policeman he had hit, abusing him, questioning his parentage.

After the police raid, we were usually in a sorry plight, what with the losses we suffered. We had to borrow money to start afresh. Sometimes we got wind of the raid in advance.

It was my job to check if the liquor was strong or weak. I would soak a rag in it and light it; it went up in flames. The stronger the stuff, the bigger the flames. Sometimes the *bhatti* would go wrong and the liquor would be weak. When it was a couple of days old it turned sour but gave a good kick. If it was weak, customers did not turn up again. They scolded us, 'This stuff is like water. You've put too much water into it. When you charge us for it, can't you serve better booze?'

But if the stuff was good, the customer would be happy — he would shudder in ecstasy. We would be glad. Mai would say, 'We never mix water into the stuff. We don't like to swindle people out of their money. Don't they say, easy come, easy go?'

When stocks dwindled and customers were one too many, Santamai added water and made two bottles out of one. Sometimes she mixed *navsagar* powder. Young novices would stealthily sneak in. Sarpate, the schoolmaster, owed us money. Once the customer was high, we would palm off water filled in empty liquor bottles.

Sometimes I rode on my bicycle to fetch the stock. I got a potful to sample; the rest of it would be loaded onto the bike. Blind drunk, I would be unable to mount the bicycle. Then some passing shepherd would help me up. Once I was home, Mai would shout at me, 'Can't you drink your fill at home? What if you die on the way?'

One morning Kamalakka, a strapping woman who had left her husband, and Nirmi, a young girl of ten, went to Arali to fetch liquor. It was a six-mile journey on foot, to and fro. They ought to have returned in the afternoon. But it was evening now and they hadn't yet turned up.

We set off for Arali, worried. Had the police caught them? Had someone beaten them? All sorts of thoughts came to mind.

We found Kamalakka and Nirmi, dead drunk. Kamalakka's sari had come loose, but she was beyond knowing it. Nirmi couldn't keep her heavy eyelids open. The tubes lay scattered around them. We ran towards them. Masamai began to wail, 'I harmed the child of my own womb. Why did I send her with Kamli?'

Mai asked me to take away the tubes. Nagi and I trudged back home, while Santamai tried to bring Nirmi back to her senses.

Liquor is the root of all discord.

We all drank at home — it was our tea. While Bashakaka was the *sarpanch* of the village, we got on well. Santamai swept the roads and Dada lit the street lamps. Thus we somehow managed to make ends meet. Dada roamed all over the village, a ladder slung from his shoulder and a kerosene tin in hand. He used the ladder to reach the street lamp, wiped the glass with the kerchief round his neck, brought down the lamp and poured kerosene into it. He filched the oil and used our house to hide it. If we met an acquaintance he made me salute him. To Bashakaka, I said 'Ale Koom Salam'. Santamai and I stayed up in the night till Dada finished his rounds.

Sarpanch Bashakaka was a Muslim. Santamai and I spent the whole

day at his house. Santamai did all sorts of odd jobs there like grinding and sweeping. I too felt free to play there. The butcher would come to the Maharwada and Santamai took beef to the Muslimwada. It was in Bashakaka's house that a villager from Basalgaon had once given me new clothes sent by Hanmanta.

Then Ramu was elected *sarpanch*. He sacked Dada because Dada was a Muslim — Mahamud Dastageer Jamadar — while he himself was a *bania* from a party opposing Bashakaka's. Along with Dada, Santamai, too, lost her job. Ramu gave the work to his favourites. Mallu's Sona began to sweep the streets and her elder son Sheshu lit the lamps.

Later came gas lamps. It was a risky job lighting them. Moreover, Sheshu was a drunkard. Shreemant accompanied him on his rounds. One day the gas caught fire and the two were enveloped in flames.

Sheshu, being sprayed with kerosene, began to burn like a straw hut. He ran about frantically in the village square, screaming his head off. Shreemant, who had only shorts on, quickly sat in the drainage water. Half his body was burnt, singed. The whole village gathered, but none dared save the burning Sheshu.

Finally Manik Seth pulled Sheshu out and people poured buckets of water over him. He was carried to the district town for treatment. The village was dark and despondent. Mallu's Sona was mad with grief.

On the third day Sheshu's corpse arrived, covered with *neem* leaves. Sheshu was dead and gone but I could still see, in my mind's eye, the village square on fire and Sheshu covered in flames. At such times I felt relieved that the job had been taken away from Dada.

Dada used to drink and brawl and get beaten up. He squandered the money he earned, tore up the currency notes and abused the *sarpanch*. Even little children made fun of him. 'On Jumma I'll fuck your Amma' was his favourite curse. He would be found lying near some toilet or the other, soaked up to the gills. We would go and haul him up. His dhoti would have come off. Santamai would tie it. He would abuse her and she would snap back at him. Nagi, Nirmi and Santamai would lift and carry him like a palanquin, and I followed, holding his chappals.

Whenever Dada took a drop too much, he picked a fight with Santamai. I would be caught in the crossfire. On one side slept a sozzled grandfather and on the other, a grandmother who coughed all night. Before going to bed Santamai prayed to the Hindu goddesses

Amba and Lakshmi while Dada mumbled a jumble of Hindu and Muslim divine names like Hydrikhaja, Bandenewaj, Hajimling, Langinshavali, Siddhayappa, Allah, Bismillah, Maulah and so on. Sometimes Santamai would be possessed. She screamed and screeched. I would wake up with a start. The noises she made scared me. I would run out, afraid to sleep next to her, and stand shivering outside. Her ululations sounded eerie in the dark. At such times Dada scraped off some dust from the wall and touched her forehead with it as if it were *angara*, holy ash. Gradually Santamai's possession would subside.

Once Dada was drunk, he couldn't resist a quarrel with Santamai. She too drank and rained blows on him. Dada would hurl away his meal-plate, scattering the mess all over the house. That day our dog Champi would have its fill. Dada would ask Santamai, 'Did you see Imam today?' Santamai would then blow up and swear at him. And I would choke with tears.

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When I was five days old, Santamai decided to hold my naming ceremony. Lakshman, her one and only brother, used to earn a living by chopping firewood and selling it. Masamai called him to have a look at the baby but he refused, saying, 'Let me fetch some firewood. We can use it to boil the baby's water.' It was his destiny which beckoned him thus; how could he avoid it?

Lakshman was axing a tree in the backyard. The hacking sound rang out in the air. Chips of wood went flying. This old tree was creepy. It looked as if it would fall on you any moment. When the wind blew, it made a creaking noise, as if grinding its teeth. Dark and menacing, it made one's blood curdle when an owl hooted on it.

Suddenly there was a loud crashing sound. Masamai's heart stopped. The tree was falling. Lakshman began to run away but the tree got him. Lakshman's head was crushed to a pulp. The race of Satubap came to an end. Instead of putting me into a cradle for the naming ceremony, they put Lakshman's corpse into a cart and carried it to Potphadi.

I was looked upon as an omen of bad luck. As it was I was born at midnight. Masamai had put me on her knee. I was wailing. Santamai and Dada woke up with the noise. Startled, Dada ran into the dark with a log of wood. He probably thought that cats were inside the house. Masamai screamed with all her might, 'It's only my baby, don't kill it!'

With no male heir left in the family, Santamai took over the village work. She swept the streets and lit bonfires for the villagers who flocked around them in the winter months. She also had to fetch betel leaves for them. She smeared the public square with cowdung. She would walk ten miles to take government papers to the district town. At the time Dada was on village duty.

One clear night, as Santamai washed her sari in the river, moonlight swirled around in the water. Just then Imam reached there. God alone knows what they talked about. But Dada spied them together. That was enough for him to taunt her all her life, specially when he had had a drop too many. It's years since that incident — their teeth have fallen off, their hair turned grey, their faces networks of wrinkles — yet whenever Dada gets drunk his grouse spills out like a running sore: 'Did you see Imam today?' And Santamai never fails to rise to the bait, tears streaming from her eyes like a falling tree.

Mule Bhimsha was another drunkard of the village. For the sake of drink, he sold off his house, his land, everything. Mhalasha Kotwal, Chandu Pujari, Basu Ajjya, Bhallu, Sharanu the tobacco dealer, Hatale Malesha, were some others who drank regularly. Thus the streets of the Maharwada were always sprinkled with intoxication. These boozers had no qualms about downing our liquor, but they would not touch water offered by a Mahar. They could have a Mahar woman, but not food prepared by her.

All the liquor dealers in the Maharwada gave periodic bribes to the police. Fed them chicken. The policemen shared the bribe amongst themselves but not with the *police patil*, for our house belonged to him. He stayed in our house and I called him 'Uncle'.

* * *

Masamai is my mother. She's the only daughter of Santamai. She was married to a poor man called Vithal Kamble. Starvation was a daily affair, yet she had to cut grass all day, lug it to the district town four miles away and sell it there. She carried piles of wood to Akkalkot to do business there, and brought back provisions for the house. It was a hand to mouth existence — daily toil for daily bread. Santamai and Dada sometimes walked for miles to Basalgaon to fetch Masamai, with loads on their heads. There were no motor cars those days.

Vithal Kamble was a labourer with a farmer. He earned a little over seven hundred rupees a year. It was his lot to work day and night. To toil, an animal among the other animals of the field. The labourer and the ruminant animals penned in the stables — they were one and the

same. Misery sat like an ox's hump on his shoulders. His gaunt ribs were like the whip marks on the bull's hide. His hollow stomach stuck to his spine with the tenacity of a gadfly. His future lay before him with all the cramped squalor of a cow-shed. How long would he have to chew the cud of hunger? He had to take his whole life in his grasp like a plough. In the waters of the irrigation canal is mingled a drop of the labourer's sweat.

The farmer that Vithal Kamble worked for was a Patil called Hanmanta Limbale, who helped him in times of need. But the Patil's needs were somewhat different, and so was his nature. It was because of him that a happy family broke up.

The *jat-panchayat* snatched Masai's baby from her breast. Another, a toddler, Chandrakant, was also taken away from her. She was divorced. Masamai had to leave behind her two young children. She was weeping. Lakshman, the baby, tried to reach out to her with his arms stretched, crying. Chandrakant threw a tantrum — he wanted to go with Mai. A husband-wife relationship can end, but how can a mother and her children break ties?

Masamai was a free bird now. She filled her belly by selling wood at the district town. But her heart was where her home was — with her husband and children. Now that was all over — she was a Sita looking for refuge in the forest of Dandakaranya.

Vithal Kamble remarried. A man can chew up and spit out as many wads of betel as he likes. If a woman does so, it only stains her honour. Once you've had her, she's spoilt fruit. How could Masamai remarry? She had nothing to eat. She was a woman discarded by her husband; the mantle of his protection no longer shielded her modesty.

Dadunya was a *gondhali* — a folk singer — of our village, who sang erotic songs and produced plays. In his spare time he went around selling utensils in nearby villages. He was the first to approach Masai. He needed a woman for the performance of *Kalagi-tura* — in the troupe of four, the woman sang, playing the tambourine, accompanied by a man on a one-string guitar. But Mai refused to sing. She wanted to lead an independent life.

However, Hanmanta Limbale managed to hook her. He kept her in a rented house in Akkalkot. Mai too sought refuge with Hanmanta. In any case she had been ruined because her name had been linked with his. Now she decided she might as well brazen it out. Hanmanta kept her like a pet pigeon. They lived happily together. Soon Masai got pregnant and delivered a baby boy. Who was the father?

Hanmanta wanted Masai — her body. But not a child. If it bore his name, it would be a blot on his family honour. Beside, the child would ask for his share of the property on growing up. Masai would in all likelihood have gone to court. Hanmanta wanted to avoid all this but how could he undo the birth of a baby?

My birth must have shaken to the foundation all the noble mansions of Patils and landlords. The very whiff of my first breath must have driven all virtue out of this world. The sound of my crying must have caused milk to spring unbidden from the breasts of all its unrelenting mothers.

Why did my mother agree to this defilement? Why did she bear this forbidden seed for nine months? Why did she yield this bitter fruit? Wasn't she tormented by the dirty looks condemning her as an adulteress? Did they celebrate my birth? Did anyone distribute sweets? Did anyone fuss over me? Or buy clothes for Mai? Who performed my naming ceremony? Whose heir was I? Who was it I could call my rightful father?

We had a neighbour called Gangubai, a quack, who was friendly with Mai. She would carry me on her back, selling needles, thread, marking nuts etc. from door to door. Displaying me, she would beg for old clothes. Women would feed her and give her clothes for me and oil for my head. Mai would be upset with Gangubai, and Gangubai would turn mournful: 'Your child helps me earn my bread. Am I killing your child?' Then the two would break into a quarrel. But as soon as Mai went out, Gangubai lifted me from the cradle and went begging.

When I was in the final year of school Gangubai came, hawking her wares, to our village. She visited us and Mai served her tea. Gangubai held me close and kissed me, stroking my back. She asked me if I would go to Akkalkot and said I should file a suit against my father. Gangubai was a mobile general provisions store. She exchanged needles, thread, marking nuts, beads, etc. for leftover food and old clothes. After Gangubai left I was discontented. I was growing up fatherless as Karna throughout the *Mahabharata*.

Hanmanta had begun to ill-treat us. There were quarrels every day. He would say the child was not his. That its eyes were like Kumbhar Dhondya's, a ruffian of the British times. Finally Masamai left him and took me to live with Santamai. Only a mother or else the earth are willing to welcome anything into their fold.

Beauty is a curse when it blesses one of the Dalits, who have a

saying: 'If she's beautiful, she's someone else's wife; mine's ugly'. A good looking woman is the target of all men's desire. Masamai's husband left her only because of her looks. Hanmata too deserted her after using her. That's why Mai was living like this with me as her only possession. How long could she go on without support?

Those who have been given power by religion on account of their high caste and money inherited from ancestors have deemed it their birth-right to abuse Dalit honour. Every village Patil and zamindar has slept with the wives of his land labourers. Used them like whores. As soon as she came of age, a girl from a poor family fell victim to their lust. You'll find the progeny of the Patil's promiscuity in some houses of the village. These households live solely at the mercy of the Patil. The whole village calls this the Patil's mistress's house and the children, the Patil's whore's brood. His benevolence, his visits, are all that matter for this household's happiness.

After me were born a string of babies — Nagi, Nirmi, Vani, Sumi, Pami, Tamma, Indira, Sidramma — in quick succession. From the same womb, fed on the same life-blood. The mother was one but the fathers were different.

Masamai got three children from Vithal Kamble. The first-born, Bhanudas, died. Chandrakant and Lakshman were born after him. These were snatched from her by her husband when he drove her out. I was born of Hanmanta. From Kaka, that is Police Patil Yashwantrao Sidramappa of Hannor, Masamai got Nagubai, Nirmala, Vanamala, Sunanda, Pramila, Shrikant, Indira and Sidram. On paper, Kaka has put down their caste as Hindu-Lingayat. But no Lingayat would touch us or accept us as one of them. We are a parallel Maharwada.

My father too was a Lingayat, and his grandfather and great-grandfather before him. That makes me a Lingayat. My mother was a Mahar. Her parents, her forefathers, were Mahars. So I am a Mahar. But I have been brought up by a Muslim — Mahmud Dastageer Jamadar — my grandfather. Shouldn't that make me a Muslim? Do claims of the heart have no religious sanction?

Am I a caste-Hindu? But my mother is an untouchable. Am I an untouchable? But my father is a caste-Hindu. I have been tossed apart like Jarasandha — half within society and half outside. Who am I? To whom does my umbilical cord join me?

Translated by Daya Agrawal
An extract from Akkarmashi

DADASAHEB MORE

The Stragglers

The long-awaited 'tomorrow' dawned at last. It was a Tuesday. Many of us did not go round begging for alms. They would stay at home on the market day as if it were their weekly day off. We got busy heaping into one pile what had been saved from the grain we got by begging in the early morning. The grain, collected from different homesteads, wasn't one of a kind but a dozen. Rice, *jowar*, wheat, *chana*, *moong*, *bajra*, maize and other such varieties were all mixed up. But the money it fetched when we sold it, was just enough to pay for our necessities like oil and salt.

Besides this assortment of grain, some of us could manage to secure a few hens too. It wasn't as if they honestly earned the birds; truth to tell, they had been got by telling a pack of lies to people in trouble. Working miracles was the line: One was promised happiness, another prosperity, a third obedient children, a fourth an end to quarrels in the family. But for all problems, a hen was the sacrifice called for. Ignorant, superstitious people made over the hen as an offering. This society of ours doesn't have the sense to wonder why a man who can bring untold wealth to others should be unable to do so for himself, but go begging from door to door. Lured by the false hope of happiness, people hand over hens to members of our clan, who earn a few rupees by selling the birds.

A number of people had with them the fowls thus acquired, to sell in the market. We set out for the market in a body. There were almost fifty of us in the group. Some wore dhotis with rents reaching up to the knees, and with parti-coloured patches. The shirts some wore had a whole sleeve missing. As for buttons, there was never a trace of them. The 'turban' looked like a rag wound round the head, half of which lay exposed. The exposed top of the head with the turban going round it looked like a field enclosed by a hedge. The footwear was odd — a slipper on one foot and a leather chappal on the other. Most of our people wore no footwear at all.

The women too made a curious sight. The saris they wore sported

patches of different colours. The patches, roughly sewn on and in an assortment of colours, looked like a cobbler's patches on old chappals. To look at the choli they wore, one would be at a loss to tell the cloth from the rough patches. The latter presented a variety of colours. The women's hair seemed to have been allowed to grow only because cutting it is prohibited. It was wholly innocent of oil and all matted. The children, sparsely dressed or with no clothes on, dark, covered with mud and dirt, sniffing and crying, ran after the women. Such was the crowd that had set out for the market. Passers-by looked on as if this were a live film show, smiled and went their way. We reached the market.

Being apprehensive that we would steal things, everyone in the market steered clear of us. No one offered to buy the mixed grain or the hen or two that we had to sell. The birds might be stolen property, they thought. Everyone in the market regarded us as thieves. We had to sell the mixed grain as bird-feed at half the market price. Our hens too had to be sold at prices considerably lower than those of other sellers. Thus the articles we had to offer had practically no value. After all, we didn't count as members of society. We might as well have belonged to a different world altogether. Those of us who managed to sell their grain or hens, would buy a few necessities with the proceeds. Four or eight annas' worth of oil for the week. No curry was ever cooked. A few drops of oil were added to the chutney, that's all. Considering this, the quantity bought was in fact more than they would need over the week. A few other things like salt would be bought. The smaller children howled for the sweets on sale, but the noise they made was drowned in the general hubbub of the market-place. If a child were particularly obstinate, its father gave it a slap or two. The child would be quiet then because it knew that it would be thrashed if it cried any more. Anyone with a little extra money would drink half a rupee's worth of liquor and drown his sorrows and worries in the cup, walking unsteadily back to his tent.

We had come to the market, the two of us, my father and I. I wanted to buy a slate. Abas, my younger brother, yelling and without a stitch of clothing on him, had followed us. We had nothing to sell. I don't how know much money my father had. My father bought me a slate for twelve annas, and two pencils for five paise. Nearly eighty paise had been spent on me alone. My father was quite put out because, while the week's supplies for the whole family cost only a rupee, he had to spend eighty paise on me alone. Just then I noticed some berries

for sale. 'Buy me five paise worth of *ber*, Anna,' I said to my father. He was wild with rage. Without a moment's thought he slapped me hard, saying, 'I've spent such a lot on you already... God knows if you'll be a scholar or a rotter! To heel, like a dog!' Little Abas, my brother, was asking for sweets. But he too got nothing. We started walking back to our tent, our faces long. On the way back, my father bought ten paise worth of *ber* and four annas worth of guavas. It was clear that we would not get them until after we had reached home.

By six in the evening, everyone was back in the camp. Here and there was a man tipsy and groggy. Some bewailed the extra money they had spent. In our small world there were at least four or five who got drunk regularly every week. They were Nagoo Dorkar, Rama Shinde, Nivritti Shinde, Shivaji Dhangapure and Subhash Bhosale. These five Pandavas, each lying stretched out in his small home, would set up a racket with their roaring and cursing: 'Hey you... haven't you got dinner ready yet? Gimme my dinner right now or I'll slit your throat!' The other people looked on and enjoyed the show. Off and on, Rama Shinde would bellow, 'Damn! what's life for ... work, work, and more work.... A man's at it to his last breath and then he drops dead... What's wrong if a man enjoys himself...' Then Nivritti would take up the chorus and shout at his daughter, 'Hey Jyantay... Where the hell are you? ... Here I've been shouting for ages for you... Can't you even say yes father?... Go and tell your ma to cook some mutton quick...' A variety of such expressions could be heard. The wiser ones among the grown-ups kept cursing the drunkards. In general, the whole scene was quite amusing. My father to used to drink — not regularly, but at intervals of one or two market-days. When he came home drunk, he would get angry with us. Everyone in our family would keep quiet then. He would gabble a bit and then drop off to sleep. A little while later, all would be quiet in the tent for the night.

The next day I went to school. I sat in the courtyard in the open. The teacher was busy teaching. I listened attentively. Seven or eight days passed like this. I attended school regularly every day. I had managed to learn the letters of the alphabet. But how can the ill-starred ever enjoy a spell of good luck? The next week we were off again to another place. We struck our tents, tied them up into bundles; packed up our belongings. We loaded our ponies. Some of us slung their bundles across their shoulders. We were on the march again like pilgrims. Which town or village we should go to, was uncertain. We

would set up our camp where we could get something by way of alms, space for our camp, grass for our ponies to graze on and a source of water close by. It wasn't easy to find such a place. On some days we walked on and on from daybreak to sundown. The children, suffering from a raging thirst under the blazing sun, drooped. The hot ground scorched our feet. If one of our smaller animals strayed into a field, we had to submit to the owner's abuse and threats; sometimes the farmer would turn violent. Still, not a word could we say in return, because we were born in one of the lowest communities in society. So we had to suffer abuse and violence without a word.

We began our journey to another village. The heat was terrible. The earth was scorchingly hot. Our dogs panted with thirst. When they saw a tree some way ahead, they raced madly for it, and waited in the shade till our band caught up with them, and when it did, walked on with it. About eight or ten families had taken to the road. The rest had stayed on at Salgar. A day or two later, five or six families would proceed in a group in another direction. About fifteen ponies belonging to eight or ten families, carrying all the worldly possessions of a nomadic band, ambled along the road. The ponies were heavily loaded. Our bundles were firmly tied up with ropes to prevent them from slipping off. On top of a bundle you could see a hen or two which was made fast with a string to the bundle. The birds too would appear half-dead with the heat.

One member or the other from each group rode a pony. It might be a woman nursing her baby, or an elderly man, or little children. Pandurang Vayaphalkar, an elderly man of sixty to sixty-five years, was astride a white pony. On the offside, a hen, tied up, lay limp as if it were dead; on the rear side a pup had been tied up because it wasn't able to walk much. Pandurang Vayaphalkar had been ailing for a long time. The heat was too much for him that day and suddenly he was giddy. Even as he rode he showed signs of great agony. His daughter Sundra, walking alongside the pony, happened to look up; she saw her father's condition. She shouted, 'Help, help... run folks, run... my father's dying...' and began to sob and cry. Pandurang Vayaphalkar's pony was somewhere in the middle of the marching column. A few of us and their ponies were some distance ahead and others lagged behind. On hearing Sundra's shouts the latter spurred their mounts and the former turned back. Everyone screamed. The women wailed loudly. With all that noise Grandpa Pandurang lost his consciousness. The men-folk lifted him off his mount.

Frightened out of our wits, we children gaped at it all in silence. We could not understand what it all was about. All that we could understand was that people were crying and shouting.

Close by was a roadside *neem* tree. They carried Grandpa Pandurang into its shade. The ponies, loads on their back, cropped the grass bordering the road. The dogs had already taken shelter under the tree. What could they know of all this agony? The ponies groaned under the loads. Grandpa was set down in the shade. The womenfolk closed in all around him. Immediately, Maruti Vayaphalkar, his brother, shouted, 'Get back, get back... you... let him have some fresh air, or he'll die.' The crowd thinned out a bit. Some struck their foreheads, some beat their breasts. It was a great disaster for our family of wanderers. There was no village nearby. It was in an odd, out of the way place that the group was thus plunged into grief. Nivritti Shinde ran off and returned with a pitcherful of water that he had got from somewhere. They splashed the water on grandpa's face. Still he lay unconscious. The women began to wail shrilly.

By this time Gangu Mavashi was possessed by her familiar. She started moaning, gesticulating wildly and shrieking. Some knowledgeable ones among us began whispered exchanges: 'Do you know, Maruti Mama, it's Ambabai speaking through Gangu Mavashi.' Grandma Gangubai Dorkar was considered to be a good medium in our community. We all believed that whenever she was possessed, all diseases, no matter which, would be cured. Everyone was quiet now. Gangu Mavashi kept on groaning and shrieking. Grandpa Pandurang's daughter lay prostrate at Gangu Mavashi's feet. Between her sobs, Sundra said, 'Please, Mother Ambabai, ask for anything that you want from me but, please, make my father well again... We have no earning member in our family as you do know...' Immediately, Gangu Mavashi raised her voice a note higher, saying, 'Look, you, I'm the *zuting* of this place... You trespassed on my territory at mid-day under the sun... I've got you now, right at the hour allotted to me... I won't let him go.' Maruti Mama now prostrated himself before Gangu Mavashi and pleaded, 'Please, please, King Zuting, ask for anything you like, but please let my brother go unharmed...' At this, between shrieks, Gangu Mavashi shouted, 'If you want me to let him go... one hen... five *chappatis*, one coconut... rice and lemon.... as soon as you camp this evening... in my name... wave them before your brother's face... put them down on the road... turn your face to this place... only then will I go in

peace.... Or I'll take him away with me...' After every member of the eight odd families had promised to make the offering, the spirit left Gangu Mavashi. Ambabai who had possessed Gangu Mavashi was making a slow departure.

Some women supported Gangu Mavashi and helped her to sit down. Some prostrated themselves before her while others praised her. Rama Shinde observed, 'Say what you will... but Gangu Mavashi is Devi Herself.' Others nodded in assent.

No one had noticed when, during all the hubbub, my father had gone off. Now he came back running. He had a fresh onion, green shoot and all, in his hand. He had pulled it out from someone's crop. Hastily the onion was split open. It was held against Grandpa Pandurang's nose. Just then a farmer, carrying a whip in his hand, ran up; no sooner was he close enough, than he lashed Subhash furiously. Subhash, writhing in pain, squealed, 'Oh! Oh! I'm dead...' All of us turned our heads and looked at the farmer. He was trembling with anger. 'Who was it that ran out of my farm?' he demanded threateningly; 'I saw someone with my own eyes.' My father stepped up to him saying, 'It was I who had come, master.... One of our elders was stricken and dying.... He was unconscious... so I took an onion... It's *my* mistake, master...' My father's meek, submissive tone went searing into my heart. But I could do nothing about it. Had I spoken a word, I would have received half-a-dozen lashes of the whip; and my own people would have beaten me up to boot.

By then some other members of the farmer's family ran up to us. I thought that they would beat my father. I started crying. My mother ran up to the farmer, caught hold of his feet, and placing her head on them, sobbed out, 'Please, master, have mercy on us.... Excuse him for once, I beg of you.' Still angry, the farmer asked, 'Why did you pluck the onion without my permission?' My father explained, 'I could see no one there, master; to go in search of someone would have taken time.. made me too late.... That's why, sir.' Lowering his tone, the farmer said, 'Don't do it again... or someone'll whip you till your bowels burst.' With this admonition, the farmer and the members of his family who had joined him, went away. Everyone of us heaved a sigh of relief. Otherwise, a second disaster would have been on us before we were out of the first.

While all this was taking place, the day had declined. Our ponies were still loaded. Who had the time to think of them? Grandpa Pandurang had regained consciousness; after a little while he felt much

better. 'Come on, let's get going,' said Nagoo Dorkar, 'or we will be late.' Everyone bestirred himself. First Grandpa Pandurang was hoisted on to the back of his pony. Some five or six women and two or three men walked alongside his pony. Others caught hold of their own ponies. The smaller children and women with their babies in their arms were seated astride the ponies. We resumed our march. The dogs which had been sitting in the shade stood up and shook themselves. They had had a long rest. What had taken place had been to their advantage.

Stumbling and tottering, we somehow reached Arag. To the east of Arag lay a heath. We turned our ponies' heads towards it. One by one, they reached the heath and halted. After all the ponies and all the people in our group had assembled there, my father's uncle, Nagoo More, said, 'Let's put up here.... There's space enough for tents... A brook's close by... grass for the ponies... fire-wood for us...' Everyone assented. Grandpa Pandurang was first helped to dismount. A rag, removed from the back of someone's pony, was spread on the ground for him to lie down on. Then everyone busied himself with unloading.

Hens, tied up and lying inert across saddles, were untied. Pots in which to boil water, earthen and metalware pitchers were untrussed. The womenfolk, a pitcher on head and a *degchi* under the arm, went off to look for wells. 'Dadasab, look after the baby while I fetch some water,' said my mother to me. I sat down with little Chhaya, about a year old, in my lap. My father started unloading the pony. First he got the harness off; then a large bag wrapped up in a blanket. Then he lifted off the saddle. Those who could not lift the bags by themselves asked for help. After the loads were lifted, the backs of the ponies glistened with sweat as if they had been washed. With the heavy loads off, the ponies were at ease. Their legs were then hobbled. My father started arranging our things. The ponies rolled in the dust. My father fished out pegs from the bags. He dug holes in the ground, one opposite the other and fixed upright posts in them. Others in our group were also busy setting up their tents. My father then tied the cross-piece firmly to the uprights. The tent-cloth — awning — made of gunny sacking, had been folded and placed on the pony's back. He spread it across the cross-piece. My small sister had kept up a steady howl all the while. It made my father cross. 'Dadasya, throw that girl away,' he shouted to me; 'Damn it, crying at all hours!' Poor thing; what could it know about the right hour to cry! I said nothing as the

work had tired father. He had been walking since morning, had been threatened and insulted by the farmer, and now he was busy setting up the tent. Presently, my father spoke again. 'Here, Dadasya, hold this end of the tent-cloth.' I set down Chhaya and caught hold of it. Pegs had to be driven into the ground on either side of the uprights. My father shouted, 'Stupid! can't you hold it right..? Such a big lump and can't even hold the cloth! How are you goin' to ask for alms tomorrow?' I pulled the awning cloth tight. My father fixed the pegs on one side of the tent and began fixing those on the other. A dog hurried under the awning and was about to sit down. My father cursed it roundly and snarled, 'Off with you.... Scoot... The devil take you...' The dog slunk out, moved off and sat down at a distance. Then at the back of the tent, my father fixed a small piece of awning. It stops the wind from blowing in from the rear.

At last, our home was ready. My father entered the tent and arranged the bag, the harness and other things neatly. Then he spread a tattered quilt on the floor and sat down on it. The little one was still crying. My younger brother had gone off with mother to fetch water. After a little while mother came back carrying a pitcher on her head. The pitcher was full of holes. They had been plugged with rags to stop the water from gushing out. On top of the pitcher was an aluminium pot to boil water in. On the outside the pot was jet black with smoke. Water from it splashed on my mother. She was drenched from head to foot. 'Dadasab... this pot... lift it off gently,' said my mother, and sat down. I couldn't have lifted the pot off otherwise. I put it on the floor. Mother set the pitcher down. Picking up the baby, mother started suckling it. The baby cried as it sucked and dropped off to sleep at the breast. By then Abas, my younger brother, came up, carrying a leaky pot. It was quite small, just enough to hold a quart or so of water. Half the contents had spilt themselves all over him on the way back. The streaks of water on his body made it look as if a dog had urinated on him. Water dripped from his hair. He was stark naked. His large crop of hair, uncut for a long time, made his neck look ridiculously thin. It looked artificial like a doll's neck. Abas set the pot down. Putting his arm round Abas, my father kissed him and lifted him on to his lap. The poor man loves his child as the shepherd loves his lamb, be it ever so dirty. 'Are there any *bhakris* left?' asked father. Mother poked about in the bag with her hand and extracted a small bundle from it. Only two or three *bhakris* had been saved from our breakfast. They were placed before us all. A few pieces were tossed

to the two dogs. The four of us ate all that remained of the *bhakris*. None had enough to make a full meal. So we ate just the chutney on top of the pile because there was not a piece of *bhakri* to go with it. What else could we do? We were so very hungry.

Turning to me, mother said, 'Dadasab, it's getting dark; come, let's collect some droppings; Abas will look after the baby.' I got up and picked up a winnowing fan; mother took a small basket. As she went out, she instructed Abas, 'Look you, Aba... Baby's asleep... Don't wake her up... Sit by her... Don't make noise... or she will wake up and cry...' Abas jumped up saying, 'Let me go with you, mother, to gather fuel...' 'Be quiet, will you?' hissed mother, 'so many roam all over the heath; it's getting dark. Fat chance of your finding fuel, smart chap that you are!' Abas sat down.

The two of us roamed about collecting droppings, dry cow-dung, and fire-wood. It was quite some time since the sun had gone down. Women and children from every one of the tents were about collecting fuel. Heedless of the dark, I'd make a dash as soon as I noticed a dry stick, because I didn't want anybody else to get it. After a while mother and I retraced our steps to the tents. We piled the fuel near our tent. Mother fetched three large stones. She arranged them into a *chulha*. One had to look about and mark the tent where a fire had been lit up, and go there for some embers to light one's own fire. Mother told me to get some from Savitri Mami's fireplace. I brought them in a rag. Mother lighted a fire. She put a *tawa* on top of the stones; she shoved some fire-wood underneath it so that it broke into flames. Mother kneaded some dough in an aluminium plate. She began to pat lumps of the dough into flat, round *bhakris*. Each family had lit up a fire. The dogs barked. Childern cried. Now and then, someone would break into a song. He would sing a snatch or two. The women were busy cooking. Father called out to Grandpa Nagoo, 'O Nagootatya, will you step across?' Grandpa Nagoo walked to our tent. Father spread a rag for him to sit on, and anxiously asked, 'Look, now that we have come to this place, what about Dadasab's schooling?' Grandpa Nagoo thought for a while and then said, 'Listen Malhari, let him go on the rounds from tomorrow asking for alms. If he is not fated to be a scholar, then he wouldn't be able to support himself by asking for alms, nor would he have the benefit of good schooling... Think, we keep wandering like this. Our bellies ride our ponies. How then can we give him any education? He will starve. No one would employ a person from our community, even to clean the cow-shed.'

Father had a clear idea of all this, but he dearly wished to make a scholar out of his son. After considering the way we were situated, he changed his mind.

Father and Grandpa Nagoo finally decided that I should go about begging for alms from the next day. They went on chatting for some time. Then Ishwar Tatya, Grandpa Nagoo's son, called out, 'Hey, father... come along here... There's something to do...' Grandpa Nagoo took himself off. Mother could not bear the idea. She spoke to my father, 'Do you know that the child doesn't know how to ask for alms... How can you send him on the rounds?' 'Should he go around when he is a grey-beard then?' returned father angrily; 'Nothing doing; go on the rounds from tomorrow Dadasya...' As for me, I had no choice. I was like a dog which, at the word 'choo', pricks its ears. I couldn't make out how I was to go about it. 'Anna, tell me, please, what I have to call out when I ask for alms,' I said entreatingly to my father. 'What should I say first?' At this mother was moved and broke into tears. Father too was touched. But with an eye to my future , he said, 'Listen... when you stand before someone's door say, "May victory attend you... May Lakshmi smile on you... May your prosperity grow... May success wait on you.... Give a piece of *bhakri*, lady..." You have to sing this out. You're not to move on unless you're given a piece of *bhakri*... Keep on asking... and, watch out for dogs... If one attacks you, hold out your switch — you're not to hit it... You're not to run... You're to walk away slowly, step by step...remember.' I listened to it all. Mother served dinner. I was very hungry. I wolfed down the food. My father called out to Grandpa Nagoo, 'Come along Tatya, have dinner with us...' Similar invitations were issued from the other tents, 'O, Rama, come dine with us...' to which Rama replied, 'Carry on... I've had my dinner.' Invitations were thus exchanged. I didn't attend to anything of this. Gulping down the food was my only concern.

It was well on into the night by the time we finished dinner. Mother made the bed. It wasn't much of a bed. Just a couple of quilts. Mother said she had stitched them about the time I was born. Large holes had developed in them. When you covered yourself with one of the quilts, your head pushed itself out of one of the holes. As for small holes, there was no counting them. You could see everything about you through them. One was spread on the floor; but more than half of it was torn so that half the sleeper's body touched the earth; we used to lie, each in a tight bundle, knees touching the chest, between the

quilts. I tried to recall what Anna had told me I was to say: 'May victory attend you... May Lakshmi smile on you.. May your prosperity grow... May success wait on you... Give a piece of *bhakri*, lady'. For a long time I kept going over it. I didn't even know when the others in our house had dropped off to sleep; nor did I know when I myself did so; so lost was I in my thoughts.

The sound of my father bustling about woke me. Father dashed some water in his face. Probably he had been a little late in getting up. That's why he was in such a hurry. Just then we heard an early morning cock crowing somewhere. On hearing it father called out to Maruti Mama, '"Mama, Mama... aa..yay..ay... Mamaa.a.... aren't you coming? The cock is calling already.' Maruti Mama too seemed to have got up hurriedly because he came out immediately saying, 'Yes, yes, I'll be ready in a minute.' Father put on a *kudmude* — a rattle shaped like an hour-glass — round his neck, put a bundle of almanacs into his bag. Dressed thus, father slung the bag onto his shoulder and picked up a stick. Maruti Mama too was similarly dressed; only, he carried a lantern too, to light him on his way. Thinking that everyone else was fast asleep, father went away with Maruti Mama.

Every Joshi is dressed this way; otherwise he wouldn't be identified as a Pingale Joshi. All grown-up menfolk ask for alms between cock-crow and sunrise. With sunrise they have to return to the tents because the *pingala*, a kind of owl, calls only at dawn, and people in general believe that our tribe understands the bird's language. The Joshi goes about a town, rattling his *bhamba*. He takes his stand at someone's doorway and goes on jabbering whatever comes to his mind. People believe that whatever he says is only a repetition of what the *pingala* has said. Why should the *pingala* worry over the sorrows of the world? It is also true that everyone in our tribe knows that the *pingala* doesn't speak to him, nor does he understand the bird's language. Many a beggar doesn't even catch sight of the bird. How can it be seen in the early hours of the morning? Still, our tribe uses the bird's name as a means to earn a livelihood and manages to keep body and soul together. We are able to get on only because we speak no evil; people of my tribe repeat, '... Lakshmi will visit your home...' But people don't understand all this. Moreover, who doesn't hope for something better? People give us something, however small the quantity, in the belief that some good will come their way. This goes on from early in the dawn to daybreak. As soon as the sun rises, our men stop asking for alms and return to their tents. No sooner do they

return, than their children, whatever their age, pick up aluminium plates, leaky pots, tins — each according to his strength — and rush off to the neighbouring town to beg for pieces of stale *bhakri*.

Translated by G.V. Bapat
An extract from Gabal

P.E. SONKAMBLE

This Too shall Pass

I have two brothers-in-law, Dhondiba and Kishan. Dhondiba is married to the elder of my two sisters, Kishan to the younger. Dhondiba's village is Chera, Kishan's is Jagalpur. They are maternal cousins, and their mothers are my aunts — my father's sisters. Both my aunts are older than my father.

After my parents' death, I lived with Dhondiba. He was humble by nature. He looked after camels belonging to high-caste people. The investment was that of others; his was only the physical labour, and as wages he would get half the fares he earned — not enough to make ends meet.

My sister used to nag him constantly. On account of his laziness, she had to toil in the hope of earning something. My brother-in-law would simply roam about on his camel, unconcerned whether or not he got passengers. Work he would not do, but he was always present at home along with his children, to swallow greedily whatever was available. So my sister was perpetually annoyed with him and would even abuse him. At such times my brother-in-law would quietly leave the house.

But sometimes his mother (my aunt) would instigate a quarrel between him and his wife. She would say: 'O Dhondiba, the things your wife says about you! She curses you with total ruin. She says, "If you can't run a household, why did you have children, you swine?"' Listening to his mother, Dhondiba would get enraged. He would thrash my sister so hard, her head would bleed profusely. My sister would squat on the floor, screaming and cursing: 'O God, I'm dying!' But Dhondiba's mother would continue to provoke him, and he would belabour my sister even harder.

I would feel very bad. But what could I do? I would feel like beating my brother-in-law in return. But I was only a small boy. When my sister at Chera was beaten,I would run away to my sister at Jagalpur. But there too I would not go to her house right away. For her husband was of a slightly peculiar nature. He would look at me threateningly

and talk in a haughty manner. He would not be happy with my arrival there, and even if he was a little happy, I was of no consequence to him.If someone said to him, 'O Kishan, your brother-in-law has come,' he would say, 'Yes, yes, that boy has come, he simply comes for no reason at all.'

I was terribly scared of him. Hence, instead of going home, I would sit in a corner of Goddess Mariai's temple. I would feel like eating the coconuts and other offerings that had been made to the goddess, but I would not dare touch them for fear of what Mariai might do. So I would simply hide in the corner. If anybody entered the temple, I would grow timid, and hope that, seeing me, someone would inform my sister of my arrival. Then some children would actually notice me, and go and say to my sister: 'O Kaku, Parlhad Mama has come.' 'O Muktabai, your brother has come. He is sitting in Goddess Marimai's temple, but refuses to come home, even when we ask him.'

Thereafter my sister would come to pick me up, but with great fear in her heart. For she was extremely frightened of her husband, who was shrewd while she was simple. The poor woman was not allowed to go anywhere. She would feel greatly distressed about it. Brother-in-law only chanted *bharuds* wherever he went. He did not eat meat and he wore the sacred thread round his neck. The high-caste people were thus somewhat friendly with him. He was all puffed up with pride about it, and would rarely speak to poor people. He felt he had reached the sky. But he forgot where he had come from. My sister would come up to me and say, 'Come, brother.' I was a little afraid to go. For those intimidating eyes of my brother-in-law, directed towards me and my sister, terrified me. Still, I would sneak along behind her and sit in a corner of the house. The people there had a bad habit. The women would ask my sister, 'What has Parlhad brought for you, now that the festival is near?' They knew that I was an orphan boy who lived at the mercy of others. Their taunts would prick my sister, and I would feel guilty, for I was young and helpless, and I could do nothing for her. Brother-in-law would eat and go out. My sister and I would then quietly munch the leftover gruel and vegetables. I would go to sleep at the temple of Guru Maharaj, where people from the Mahar community gathered every night. People would see me and ask, 'Who's that, there in the dark? Who's there?' Someone would say, 'He's Kishan's brother-in-law.' And someone else would say, 'He's the little son of that Irmama. When his father was alive, they were well off. Many people would go to him, for he

was a magic doctor. But now bad days have fallen upon his child. And that Kishan too, does he care for him? Kishan is so well off at present, he should bring the boy up. But that's not likely, when he's so stingy.'

I would lie there all night, and in the morning I would leave for Chera, at times informing my sister, at times not. If I did not inform her, my sister would be anxious. Then somebody would tell her, 'O Muktabai, Parlhad has gone towards Chera.' And she would sit there, fretting and weeping. Sometimes I wouldn't go to my sister's house even when she came to fetch me from the temple, but return to Chera direct. Sometimes I would tell myself it was still daylight and set out elsewhere. But by the time I arrived at the farms of Bukka and Bembra, the sun would set. I would be scared and even if the leaves just rustled, I would imagine things leaping out at me. Near the Sutar farm my fears would increase, for it was rumoured that under the banyan tree, there was a terrifying ghost. I would walk at a rapid pace, and would start at the slightest sound. Sometimes an owl would hoot, and I would shudder at the bad omen. Sometimes my feet would be cut by the dry stalks on the ground, while the dead thorns would prick me. The thorns would break in half as I tried to pull them out of my feet. I would regret not having gone to my sister's house. I was being taught a lesson for spurning her affection, or so I'd feel.

I passed Standard Four. I wondered what I should do. Just then something strange happened. My sister from Chera brought my sister from Jagalpur home for her delivery, planning to pinch and scrape and make do somehow. My sister was lightened of her burden; she had a daughter. The house at Chera was merely a thatched hut. An oil lamp was kept lighted all night for the young mother. One night the lamp set the house on fire. The fire was uncontrollable. People tried hard to put it out by pouring buckets of water. But in vain. There was a strong wind. As the wind blew, the house turned to ashes. Everybody started gossiping about the fire. The entire Mahar community was saying, 'Don't know why Sakhu brought her sister along.' Some women would say, 'She wanted to show her love for her sister.' To this, other women would reply, 'Big deal! Will our houses need to burn down to cool her belly?' Still others would say, 'Don't talk like that, bad times come to everyone.'

My sister at Chera was very poor. But she had the habit of putting by some scraps in the hut for a rainy day. Besides, some seedless cotton was stored in the camel's saddle. All these things were now ashes. As it is they had no clothing, and even the rag quilt kept to provide

warmth during the cold and rainy seasons was now destroyed. My sister's children piddled on it a lot, but even so the patchwork quilt was good enough for warmth in winter. But now that was gone. 'The whole house burned down, but no one was harmed. God's grace is still with the poor!'

Everywhere, there was the same hue and cry. 'Fire! Fire! Sakhubai's house is on fire!' 'Why did the bitch bring her sister here? She should have left her where she was.' Some said, 'Their parents are dead. So she must have thought she should look after her.' Some would come to her and sympathetically say,' O Sakhu, come to our house, we'll give you something.' Others would say, 'Sakhu, we'll give you clothes for your children.'

Thus the days passed. Some gave us old clothes and some gave us pulses, some gave us grains and some gave us rice. Sister did not throw away the charred *moong* and *urad dal* from the bundles that had been in the hut. But as it tasted awful, she would mix it with the *dals* given by others. Although it still tasted burnt, we had to eat it without protest. By and by we repaired the mud walls of our house, and thatched them crudely with a roof made of twigs, leaves and fodder. We started living in the house again. Summer was at its peak. The sun was scorching hot. In the afternoons we would sit under the tamarind tree belonging to the Brahmin.

Everybody would say, Sakhu's husband should now leave his camel and take up whatever work he gets. But brother-in-law was very stubborn. He would not leave his camel. If we requested him to do some work, he would retort, 'I'm busy with my camel, you mind your own business.' He was not ready to do any other work. Food or no food, he would loaf around on his camel. Freight or no freight, he couldn't care less. Only my poor sister would struggle, for she had children. She would either clear cowdung from, or carry wood or grass to, someone's house. I too would be with her. At times I felt like saying no. But afraid she would curse me, I had no choice but to stick with her, wherever she went. The rainy season was just beginning. Although it had not actually started pouring, the weather became cooler. Everyone began saying: 'O Sakhu, don't send your brother to school. Fix him up as a servant somewhere.' Sister would say, 'My brother is still young.' But the people would reply, 'Don't pamper him at home with love and affection. It doesn't pay. He is thirteen years old. What's wrong with the fellow?' Women would say to me: 'O Parlya, will you work as a servant in the house of Kishanrao Patil

or Appa More?' I would keep mum. Sister would be a little happy. For if I worked, she would get some money to run the house. Besides, my daily bread would be taken care of.

Sister thus got me employed. Brother-in-law did not pay heed. I was nonplussed. Kishanrao Patil employed me at Rs. 2.50 per month. Everyone felt that my sister was now comfortable. For one thing, I ate outside the house. For another, she could pile up the money months on end, and buy something for the house. But I had never done this type of work before. For a while I felt good, for it was still summer and there wasn't much work. Besides, my employers did not nag me. Also, I ate better here than at my sister's — the same sort of *bhakri* and vegetables, but better spiced. At sister's place it was different. At times I would get food, and at times I would not. At times I would get a small quantity of bread with plenty of *ambadyachi bhaji*. Would often have to fill our stomachs with these herbs dried and stored during the harvest. Or else, we would eat other vegetables with no proper seasoning. That explains why I used to like the food at Kishanrao Patil's house. But then they began to make me eat close to the piles of dried dung cakes, or near where small children sat to relieve themselves.I was revolted, and thought it a hardship to work against my will, but I nevertheless ate. I felt like running away. But I was in a fix, and my nature was timid. Going to school was certainly better, even if I got no food for it. Here I did get food, but I had to eat where the children sat to shit! I felt miserable. One day I went to the Patil's farm to collect fodder. There was a huge stack of it. How much fodder could I carry? Even if I did my level best, I could only carry one or two sheaves. And the wind was blowing fiercely. I tied up the bundle but it was not tight enough, and flopped around. With the strong wind in my face, I could not move forward. Some passersby said: 'What, Parlya, become a labourer, have you?' A few schoolboys asked me teasingly: 'So you've left school, have you? Are you a servant at Kisan Patil's?' I had no answer. When many people questioned me thus, I would simply grunt in agreement, feeling awkward as I did so. But beggars can't be choosers. I had no choice but to work. Sister too was unhappy about it. But she had no alternative; her house was in ashes. She would say to me: 'O Parlya, please work well so we can keep home and hearth going.'

I would think, if I had parents, they would have brought my sister Mukta home for delivery, and my sister Sakhu's home would have been spared. But heaven knows why my parents went to God so soon.

Were they afraid of us? And now the Patil's family was overburdening me with work. I was a young boy. How could I carry on like this? Then the rains started. Brother-in-law was angry with my sister for making me work. He said to her: 'We'll face life as it is. Why are you making him slave?' Then, turning to me, he said, 'Go, Parlhad, go to school.' I felt relieved and stayed at home that day. But the next day Kishanrao Patil came over and said in an angry voice, 'O Parlya, what happened to you, you lout? You've got no gratitude. Why are you sitting idle at home?' He asked my sister, 'Where is your husband?' Then brother-in-law came out and said, 'Sir, only this boy and his sister have a hand in this. I know nothing.' It was a good thing that I had not collected my salary so far. I felt that the work I had done equalled the food I had eaten, so the Patil and I were quits. I thus decided to leave the Patil's service and stay at home. The Patil walked off in a huff, without giving me a second look. Everyone began accusing me: 'O orphan boy, the house of your sister was burned because of you. Why did you leave your job?' I would hear all this and sometimes lose my head. But they were elders. So my sister would hold me back. If I felt it too keenly, I would cry, sitting by the side of a neighbour's house. Then I'd be off sulking to someone's farm to do odd jobs and eat whatever stale food they offered me. Sometimes, if nothing else was available, they would say, 'Eat, boy, bake these ears of grain and eat them.' At times I would eat and at times I would simply stay without food. For often these people were just putting me to the test, and would say, 'What! We've hardly said the word "eat" and you're gobbling already. Hasn't your school taught you any manners? When will you get some sense?' So I would eat only if they insisted. I would wash the meal down with plenty of water. The baked grain would then swell up and make uncanny noises in my stomach, which would start to ache. And I would curse myself for having eaten the stuff.

As it happened, my sister at Chera was going through a bad phase. To make matters worse, there was no school in the village and everyone felt I was whiling away my time doing nothing at home. I too wasn't enjoying myself. One day my brother-in-law at Jagalpur called me and said: 'O Parlhad, will you stay here with us? We will open a shop for you. But you'll have to stay here for ten years. Decide right now. People will say all kinds of things. But if you stay here for ten years, we shall get you married, and bear all the expenses.'

I was not keen on marriage. But I felt I would become worldly-

wise if I sat at a shop. So I accepted my brother-in-law's offer, and with a slate and notebook, left for Jagalpur. My sister and aunt wanted me to stay on in Chera. They said to me, 'That bugger Kishan is as shrewd as a crow. As if he's going to provide you with a shop!' But I did not listen. I went to Jagalpur hoping for a shop. Instead, my brother-in-law set me to work hoeing Appa Rao's land — by which I mean a field grabbed by Appa Rao. There was something illegal about the land, I wasn't sure what. But that wasn't my business. I was merely concerned with earning my bread. And the land was not even productive. Only useless weeds and stray crops would grow there.

I would go to the farm daily, carrying my hoe. In spite of all the difficulties, I applied my mind to the task and worked sincerely. Only a few *urad* plants had sprouted where they had space to grow, for the grass was so thick they had little room. It was as if nothing had been sown there. Herds of cattle would come there to graze. My brother-in-law had forbidden me to allow them on the farm. But I was only a stranger and an orphan, and nobody listened to me. Some girls from the Mahar community would bring their buffaloes there to graze. They would then settle them in a pond nearby. The water in the pond was muddy and full of fish-like creatures. I would think they were real fish, and when they leapt in the pond, I would try to grab them. The girls would abuse me for disturbing their animals. Some of them would remark sarcastically: 'Why is Mukta's brother Parlhad here? He's only good for disturbing buffaloes.' Others who did not know me would want to know who I was. Once, when the buffaloes came very close to the field, and I began driving them away, the girls started showering me with abuse. Not just that, but they made a funeral stretcher out of twigs and sticks, and laid on it a clay effigy representing me.

Gradually, I got to know everyone in the village. Some boys from there used to go to school at Hadolti. Sitting in Appa Rao's field, I would call out to them, 'Friends, is the Standard Five course very tough?' They wouldn't answer me. For all of them belonged to the higher castes, and were very snobbish about it. They didn't want to pollute themselves by speaking to me. I was crazy after learning. One of them was a Koli boy named Vithal. He was from Barahali, but he lived with a relative in Jagalpur and studied at Hadolti. He befriended me because the others kept away from him, as he belonged to a somewhat lower caste and was from a different village. Daily, as I weeded the grass and he passed by the farm on his way to school, I

would ask him whether English was a difficult language.He would say, 'Yes,it is rather difficult. But why are you asking when you don't come to school?' Then he would add: 'Maths and English are a little tough, and the Science teacher is very nasty.' I would think, Hadolti is not far off, and my brother-in-law,instead of asking me to sit in a shop, should send me to school. But how would he, when he was only interested in hoarding money? He had no concern for others. He had got above himself, and had no eyes to see those left below. I felt that though my sister and brother-in-law at Chera were much poorer, they were a thousand times better than him. I was bitterly sorry that I had come to Jagalpur. I wanted to run away. But how could I go back to Chera? I had come away though they had told me again and again not to. I was trapped. I didn't have the face to run away. Whatever I did would be wrong. It was either the frying pan or the fire. And I would say to myself, this too shall pass.

Translated by R. Raj Rao
An extract from Athavaninche Pakshi

Short Stories

Short Stories

BANDHUMADHAV

The Poisoned Bread

Come harvest time with its operations of winnowing and sifting, when the birds whirl in the sky, my heart bleeds like a wounded bird as I recall the bygone harvest of twelve years ago, when I had gone to meet my grandfather — Yetalya Aja to us — at Kupad.

That day, as usual, Grandpa Yetalya took me with him as he went out looking for a job of winnowing and treading out the corn at the threshing floor. As a matter of fact he intended to beg for me a cucumber or a marrow or a few peanuts, if possible, at one of the farms. And by getting me to assist him he hoped to get a slightly larger share of the corn and a few ears of jowar for us.

We stopped at a threshing floor. There, tidying a pile of dishevelled ears of corn, was Bapu Patil. Grandpa approached Patil and saluted him with a *johar*. Acknowledging Grandpa's salute like a swaggering maharaja, Bapu Patil said,

'Hey, what brings you here at such an early hour? Hope you haven't come here with your mind set on evil. For don't they say, an encounter with a Mahar in the morning, and you're doomed for good.'

Grandpa displayed no reaction to Bapu Patil's insolence. On the contrary, he appeared extremely meek, and with the utmost respect said to Patil,

'Why do you say that, Anna? I am your slave. I have come to you on purpose on hearing of the operations at your threshing floor. My lord is our bread-giver and we find it a privilege to beg for our share of corn, master. I am your begging Mahar and feel proud to be so.'

But Grandpa's humble plea had the reverse effect on Bapu Patil, who turned more sarcastic:

'Don't give me that line, you're no longer the Mahar-Mangs of the good old days, to beg for your share of the corn. You are now Harijans! You've even started claiming equality, so I was told, eating and drinking with us at the city hotels. So, there remains absolutely no difference between us, does there? Now that you're our peers, tell me, why do you still beg for a share of the corn?'

And yet I could see no adverse effect of Bapu's attack on Grandpa. In fact, I discerned a sense of pride in him as he straightened himself and said,

'How could you say that, Anna? This Yetalya is certainly not one of those claiming equality. How can one, in that case, account for God's creating religion and the castes?'

'Come on, don't you know that the rain-god got enraged because you — the Mahars and Mangs — have profaned religion, and abandoning caste, have defiled Lord Vithoba of Pandharpur. How else can you account for the drying up of the Chandrabhaga river?' Bapu Patil added insult to injury.

I could take it no more. I felt my cheeks burning. But I quelled my temper and, cutting Bapu Patil short in the middle of his fiery tirade, burst out, 'Patil, will you kindly tell me what you meant when you accused us of forgetting religion, abandoning our caste and of polluting the god? And if a religion can't tolerate one human being treating another simply as a human being, what's the use of such an inhumane religion? And if our mere touch pollutes the gods, why were the Mahars and Mangs created at all? And who, may I know, who indeed, created them? And would you please tell me the name of the god whom the Mahars and Mangs can claim as their own?'

My retort made Bapu Patil wild. I'd addressed him simply as 'Patil' whereas the rest of our clan called him Anna or 'elder brother'. And to top it all a Mahar was answering him back. Violent anger shook him and he screamed at me: 'Look at that snot-nosed brat! He can't even keep his nose clean and yet has the audacity to talk back to me! Yetalya, whose good-for-nothing whelp have you brought with you?'

The violent rage of Bapu Patil sent Grandpa into a panic. Knowing too well that in a fit of temper Bapu Patil was capable even of committing murder, he started shaking violently. In a voice stricken with fear and in the humblest of tones, therefore, Grandpa replied, 'He's my eldest daughter's son, from Sangalwadi. He's too young to know how to speak to his elders. He's city-bred and has learnt to read and write.'

'Need he be so impertinent just because he knows how to read and write? And mind you, even if a Mahar or Mang gets educated, no one will ever call him a Brahmin. A Mahar is a Mahar even if he passes L.L.B. and becomes a barrister. You should know the story of Chokhamela. Was he let into the temple by Vithoba of Pandharpur? Why, I ask you, has Chokhamela been kept at the foot of the temple?

One should always keep to one's own position.'

Having been brought up in the city of Sangli, I was a little bolder than the rest of my clan. So I said to Patil: 'What's this "position" you're talking about, Patil? And whose position?'

At my retort, Patil exploded: 'Look here, boy! Simply because you've had a little education, don't think you can teach me. You should know that God intended to have a definite hierachy when he created the Brahmin, the Maratha, the fisherman, the weaver, the Mahar-Mang, the Dhor and the cobbler in that order. Everyone must abide by this scheme and act accordingly. Put every man in his proper place, as they wisely say. A chappal is never worshipped in place of God, is it?' He paused.

I was determined to give tit for tat. 'So you think you can treat us like your footwear! But are we really like that? Aren't we also made of the same flesh and blood as the rest of you? We too are born after nine months in our mother's womb. Isn't it logical then,' I ended rhetorically, 'that basically there's hardly any difference between us?'

'Yetalya, have you come here to work or to quarrel with me? If you and your grandson are so well-off, why in the first place did you come to me to beg? Get lost! A little learning doesn't entitle that boy to teach me, understand?'

At this Grandpa Yetalya literally fell at the feet of Bapu Patil and appealed to him with tears in his eyes: 'Don't, don't say that, please. He's a tiny tot. Just a boy. Please don't take him seriously. He hasn't seen enough of the world and doesn't know how to speak to his elders.' And then turning to me he chided: 'Mhadeva, don't just stand there gaping at Anna. Pick up that grubbing-hoe and start work.'

I felt helpless and dumbfounded as he handed me the hoe.

The next moment I set to work with my head bent low, moving the grubbing-hoe in the heap of corn. Somehow I managed to suppress my anger. Bapu Patil was standing close by, watching us for some time. After a while he left but not before warning us: 'Finish the job before I return from breakfast. We'll yoke the bullocks for the winnowing in the evening. Hurry up. Don't you know you have to work hard if you want your share of corn?'

We then seriously yoked ourselves together for the work at hand. Grandpa, however, left me half-way through it saying that he would go to Gyanba Patil's threshing floor to fetch a tripod and a few measures of corn. I was left alone.

I was working hard at the threshing floor. The red hot sun was

scorching me. The exhaustion caused by the hard work and the unbearable heat of the sun made me sweat profusely all over. I was famished. But there was no trace of Grandpa and I was far from achieving the target. Wild ideas began to cook in the heated cauldron of my brain.

I was worried at the thought of Bapu Patil turning up suddenly, and finding the job unfinished. And since I had already roused his anger, I thought, I was going to be easy prey.

And before the thought died away, Bapu Patil, now accompanied by Tuka Magdoom, arrived there quite unexpectedly. I was scared stiff. I was lagging behind in my work; there was no trace of Grandpa yet; and here appears my tormentor! 'You, grandson of Yetalya, has your grandfather dropped dead?' shouted Bapu Patil.

'He's gone to Gyanba Patil's farm to fetch a tripod,' I faltered, already frightened.

At that Bapu Patil was extremely furious and started abusing Grandpa in the most humiliating terms: 'Has he gone to fetch the tripod or to whore with his wife...?' Tuka Magdoom did his bit faithfully by aggravating the matter: 'Oh these Mahars are a lousy lot. You'll never find them at their work. These good-for-nothing fellows only know to while away their time.'

I could control myself no more. And yet I found myself pleading before Bapu Patil: 'Why do you abuse him? Grandpa will be here soon...'

Unknowingly I had added fuel to the fire for the inflamed Patil was now screaming with biting sarcasm: 'So you don't want me to abuse your grandfather. Should I then touch his feet?' And turning to Tuka Magdoom he said, 'I've been watching this chap since morning. This brat of a Mahar has been rudely answering me back.'

'No use telling me, Anna. Just give him a hard kick in the loins. He deserves nothing better than that.' Tuka Magdoom incited him.

Presently Grandpa arrived, running like mad. His very appearance was enough for Bapu Patil to let loose his volley of abuse: 'I say, Yetalya, were you assigned to do a job or to play hide-and-seek? It's past noon now. And this grandson of yours has only been toying with the weeds. Stop working this instant at the threshing floor. I shall manage it myself. Get up! I'll give you nothing...Get up!'

'Don't do a harsh thing like that, Anna, you can kick us if you like but please don't starve us.' Grandpa pleaded with tears in his eyes. But the stony hearted Patil was not moved. We eventually finished

the assigned job and got the bullocks yoked and moved them onto the threshing floor.

But after we had toiled throughout the day Bapu Patil did not give Grandpa even a few measures of jowar. Grandpa was crestfallen. As we dejectedly left the threshing floor, however, Grandpa could not fail to notice the pen where stale, rancid pieces of bread lay scattered on the ground in front of the oxen. It's rightly said that as the Chamar has his eye on the *chappal*, so does the Mahar on stale bread. Flies were swarming over the mouldering crumbs which had turned green and foul.

Grandpa begged Bapu Patil for those crumbs. The oxen seemed to have refused to eat them. They were smeared with dung and urine. Grandpa collected them all with happy excitement and neatly put them into his sackcloth. And he left the place but not before blessing the Patil. I followed him with my head hung low. There was a heavy silence between us. Finally breaking it, Grandpa said, 'The landlord got angry with me because of you, Mhadeva. I had thought that having toiled the whole day we would get a larger measure of corn. Now, what shall we have for supper?'

'We'll gulp down the crumbs you collected. Haven't we got these rotten pieces as a reward for labouring all day long? A good exchange indeed! Are we any better than cats or dogs? Throw a few crumbs at us and we are happy,' I said mockingly.

'You said it,' Grandpa exclaimed. 'Mhadeva, will the Mahars and Mangs never be happy? What a humiliating life we live! Do you think I feel happy about being oppressed by the landlords and the rest of the villagers? I too want to retaliate and have a good fight for the humiliation and injustice they have been piling upon us. But, my boy, I am helpless! I see no end to this suffering.' lamented Grandpa.

'But why should it go on? Even a lion locked in a cage all his life forgets how to hunt. This hereditary land-right has trapped us Mahars for good. How can we dream of doing business independently since we've been fed all our lives on the charity of others? What achievement can we ever boast of? All that comes from begging is more begging.'

As I erupted spiritedly, filled with disgust, Grandpa Yetalya stood gaping at me, stunned. I could see the admiration he felt for me. He seemed to be enveloped by an impenetrable darkness on all sides. After a while he said, 'Mhadeva, I fully agree with what you say. But how does one escape from the fix of this hereditary holding?'

'By abandoning it. There's no alternative.' I replied immediately.

He walked in silence for a few moments. He looked as if he were lost in deep thought. Suddenly he stopped and turning to me, asked, 'How will the Mahars survive if they abandon the land-right? Thanks to it we can at least get these stale crumbs. Only this way can I approach the landlord and beg for bread as my right. But if that too is gone, what are we left with?'

'When I said we should abandon the land-right, I didn't mean we should give it up literally. But we must stop begging under the pretext that we are getting our rightful share of corn. And instead of enslaving ourselves to life-long labour in exchange for that right, we must free ourselves from the land-bondage and learn to live independently, with a sense of pride. We Mahars have been misled by the false notion of land-right, taking it as a rightful favour to beg for bread as long as we live. We forget all the while that the crumbs they give us make us slaves.'

I suddenly stopped talking as we approached home.

'You're right, my boy. I am convinced. You've touched my heart,' said Grandpa and threw a few crumbs from his sack to the dogs squatting opposite our house.

Grandma came rushing out of the house and shouted at Grandpa: 'Have you gone mad? If you give all the food to the dogs what shall we eat?' She collected all the pieces thrown before the dogs and cleaned the mud off them. She then mixed them with *dulli* and cooked them for supper. At night everyone at home greedily hogged the stuff. What with the heavy meal, we feel asleep immediately after supper.

But the next morning we woke up to the sound of Grandpa writhing in agony like a poisoned dog. He was vomiting and purging too.

All the neighbours huddled together and started suggesting various types of remedies. I was sitting by Grandpa's bed, helpless and confused. But even at that time, in spite of myself, I could visualize the entire predicament of the Mahar caste. In those frenzied moments, I thought I saw the crumbling, mildewed pieces of bread smeared with dung and urine taken from Bapu Patil's cow pen floating before my eyes! The share of corn which Grandpa always took as his rightful dole from Bapu Patil, I was convinced beyond doubt, had caused the vomiting and dysentery. He seemed to have taken to heart the whole episode at Patil's threshing floor. Sitting by the side of his bed, shedding tears, I felt benumbed and despondent. My mind was wailing in agony. 'When shall the meek and humble people of my community be uplifted? And when shall they be treated like human

beings... When?'

In the meantime my maternal uncle had brought a doctor all the way from Sangli. Examining Grandpa, the doctor asked, 'What did he eat last night?' I went into the kitchen and brought the earthen pot in which the rancid crumbs of bread mixed with *dulli* had been cooked. Putting it in front of the doctor I said, 'These are four-day-old stale and mouldering pieces of bread cooked with *dulli* — this is what he ate last night.'

The doctor looked surprised as he said, 'That's it! The mould in the stuff created toxin. That toxin must have caused his dysentery. It's a serious case..'.

Grandpa showed great amazement as he lay in bed: 'What? You say the crumbs had turned to poison? It was in fact poison? Poisoned bread...? Really poison?'

Grandpa lost hope. The dysentery and the vomiting had almost killed him. And the doctor's diagnosis was the last straw.

None of the medicines suggested by the doctor proved effective and we became helpless.

Seeing him writhing in agony I broke down and in an emotionally choked voice, said to him, 'Grandpa... Grandpa, please say something to me!' I could say no more and started weeping. Grandma immediately joined me, and uncle too started sobbing.

Mustering all his strength and with tremendous will power Grandpa finally succeeded in articulating a few words: 'Mhadeva, don't weep, my boy. I'm an old thing now. And being so old, I may stop breathing any moment. What can I say to you now? I can only say: never depend on the age-old bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of the Mahars. This poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man...'

Then he stopped abruptly, turned his face away and closed his eyes for ever.

Grandma was the first to react. She broke into a loud wailing. My aunt joined her and then everybody raised a deafening lament. The ominous lapwings too were producing shrill and piercing notes in the sky. I was numb. Everything was numb.

Amidst the commotion I could still hear Grandpa's last words: 'The poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man....' The recollection of these words put a stop to my sorrow in the loss of my beloved Grandpa. They inflamed me with a sense of fury and

disgust, prompting me to retaliate.

And therefore, when it is harvest time with its operations of winnowing and sifting, and the birds whirl in the sky, my heart bleeds like a wounded bird as I recall the bygone harvest, twelve years old now...

Translated by Ramesh Dnyate

WAMAN HOVAL

The Storeyed House

There was something really wrong with the State Transport bus. It had come up the winding road in the mountain as if with a life-time's effort. The road was now down-hill and yet the bus moved as slowly as a sick man walking with the help of another. It reached the plain where the dispensary building was situated, and stood still, like an obstinate bull. Now, the destination was hardly a mile or two away. But the driver was sore and the conductor had no option but to be silent. When they realized that the bus wouldn't move any faster, a couple of passengers exclaimed: 'Goddamit for a bloody nuisance!'

The conductor asked the passengers to get down and they all put their strength together to push the bus. Having gained this initial momentum, the bus started. Passengers clambered up, jostling one another. The conductor rang the bell and the bus gradually took on speed. It entered the village reluctantly, like a truant child being dragged to school. As it wound its way through the curves on the outskirts, it groaned and croaked like a hen about to lay eggs, and stopped with a bang in front of Bhujaba Patil's residence. As it halted, it gave a big lurch, sending the passengers helter-skelter, churned like water in a pitcher when the carrier stumbles.

All the passengers got down.

The coolie put his hand on a huge wooden box and shouted, 'Whose box is this?'

Bayaji, who was brushing away the dust from his body, answered. 'Oh, it's mine, please lower it down.'

The coolie heaved and grunted as he lowered the box which Bayaji caught with ease.

Bayaji had packed his entire household goods in this box. There was no longer any reason to hang around in Bombay. He had worked honestly for the past thirty-five years in the dockyard and had retired from service two months before. Not that he had held an important position. He had merely got an extension for two years; during that

period he had become a supervisor. Otherwise his entire life had been spent lifting heavy loads. He had worked very hard whenever he could, day and night.

Bayaji had crossed sixty but was in sound health. He had a sturdy frame right from birth, and hard work had given a well-formed shape to his strong body. He paid fifteen paise to the coolie, put the box on his own head and began to walk in the direction of his house into which he had thrown pots and pans and sundry other things.

As he reached Kadam's house he saw Bhujaba coming towards him. Bhujaba was a known rascal of the village. Bayaji balanced the burden on his head. Straightening his neck, he said, 'Greetings to you, sir, how are things with you?'

Bayaji was a Mahar by caste and according to age-old custom should have greeted Bhujaba with 'My humble salutations to you, sir, who are my father and mother.' So, when Bayaji merely said 'Greetings' Bhujaba became furious and said, 'Do you think you can become a Brahmin merely by saying 'Greetings?' Can you forget your position simply because you've turned Buddhist?'

Bayaji was nonplussed. For a moment, he was tempted to knock him down with his box but realized that he couldn't afford to do so. Besides, now he had come back to his village for good. He was to spend the rest of his days on this soil and would be interred in the same oil. He would not be able to return to Pune or Bombay hereafter. It was not good policy to incur the hostility of anyone in the village, least so of the Patil, the village headman.

So he said in a meek tone, 'Sir, why spring this on me even before I set foot on the soil of my forefathers? I have to stay here till the end of my life.'

'Why? Aren't you going back to your job?' asked Bhujaba. 'No sir, my service is over, I've turned sixty.' With this Bayaji lifted the load from his head a little to place it in position.

'Then you've collected your Fund amount?' Bhujaba was taking his measure. 'Yes sir,' Bayaji replied with pride. 'How much?' Bhujaba asked greedily. 'Not much, what can a daily worker earn?' Bayaji answered. 'Why won't you mention the figure, man?' Bhujaba persisted artfully.

'Some two and a half thousand rupees.' Bayaji gave the correct figure.

'Bayaji, you have a heavy load on your head. Go to your house first. We'll talk at leisure later.' Bhujaba said in mock sympathy.

'Yes, yes.' Bayaji mumbled and walked in the direction of his house. At the moment, Bayaji was the proud owner of two and a half thousand rupees in cash, so it made no difference whether he was an untouchable or a Buddhist. If only one could swindle out of the untouchable Bayaji — or rather Buddhist Bayaji — four or five hundred rupees, that was enough. With the thought in his mind, Bhujaba entered his *wada*, the big house.

Exchanging pleasantries with people he met on the way, Bayaji reached the public building called Takkya in the untouchables' settlement. The building was named Buddha Vihar by those who had embraced Buddhism. As Bayaji neared Buddha Vihar, the children, who were playing with a ball made of rags, finished their game and cried out, 'Baiju Nana is here, Baiju Nana is here!' and scampered in the direction of Bayaji's house. Bayaji's eighty-five-year-old mother quickly scrambled to her feet. She had aged much but her old-world frame was still sturdy, and her teeth were strong enough to break grams. She could thread a needle without help. When she heard of Bayaji's arrival her heart swelled.

As Bayaji came in, his wife concealed her joy with the end of her sari and took down the box from his head. His grandchildren clung to him and began to twist the folds of his dhoti. The neighbouring children watched the scene in idle curiosity.

'Come, get into the house, children!' said Bayaji. His mother walked out with a bent back and told Bayaji to wait outside the door. Bayaji obeyed.

The old woman came forward, poured some water over the piece of bread in her hand, moved it around Bayaji's face and flung it away as an offering. She ran her palms over his cheeks and pressed her fingers on his temples. All eight fingers gave out a cracking sound.

Bayaji's family was doing well. He had eight children in all, six sons and two daughters. The daughters had been married off and had given birth to children. The elder sons looked after the fields, the next two sons were in government service, the one after them was a school-teacher and the sixth one was still studying. Since they knew that Bayaji was coming home for good the elder son in service and the two daughters were already home to greet him. All of them wondered what their father had got for them from his lifetime's earnings.

The next day when Bayaji opened the box, it revealed only some pots and pans, nails and photographs.

Looking at these, the elder daughter asked, 'Nana, how is it that

you haven't brought anything for us?'

Bayaji was amused that his daughters thought in this childish manner even after they had children of their own. He ran his eyes over all his children and said, 'Look here children, if I had brought new clothes for you, they'd tear, if I had brought an ornament it would soon wear out. Out of my earnings I wish you to have something that'll last longer.'

Bayaji paused after these words.

His eldest son was godly. He said, 'Neither we nor our wives want anything. Tell us what you'd like us to do.'

'Look children, ours is such a large family. Even at mealtime, we've to eat by turns or sit crowded, knocking our knees together. I wish to build a house out of my earnings, and it has to be a storeyed house; the usual three-portioned house won't be adequate for us.'

All were happy with this plan.

The plan was finalized and the foundation of the storeyed house was laid on the auspicious new year day.

The news that Bayaji was building a storeyed house spread like a cry from the rooftops. There was only one storeyed house in the village and that belonged to Kondiba Patil. That Bayaji, an untouchable creature, should think of a rival storeyed house was too much for Kondiba to bear. Others also murmured that the untouchables were forgetting their position.

Work on the foundation had started. Dattaram Vadar was given the contract of construction. The foundation trenches were filled with mud, bits of stone and other fillings. Work progressed with speed. One day Bayaji saw Kondiba coming towards him and greeted him. 'It's with your blessings that I have ventured on this storeyed house.'

'Baiju, you shouldn't lose your head simply because you've set aside some money. Do you aspire to an equal status with us by building this house? The poor should remain content with their cottage, understand?' Kondiba remarked rather sharply.

'No Patil, please don't misunderstand me.' Bayaji was a little dizzy with nervousness.

'How do you say that? One should keep to one's position. You shouldn't let a little money turn your head.'

'I only wish to build a shelter for my family. Then I shall be free to breathe my last.' Bayaji answered.

'Who says you shouldn't have a house? You can have a small house with three convenient portions, a veranda in the front and at the back

and the living section in the middle. Why spend unnecessarily on a storeyed house?' Patil gave his counsel.

'No, but...' Bayaji faltered.

'You may go in for a storeyed house only if you don't wish to stay in this village. I hope you know what I mean.' Kondiba shot out as a warning and walked away. Other ruffians in the village threatened Bayaji in a similar manner.

Out of fear Bayaji had to abandon plans for the storeyed house. The conventional three-portioned house was taken up. Work was resumed and the walls rose rapidly. The middle portion was a little elevated and a small first storey fixed up there with a wooden flooring. This part could be reached by stairs rising from the kitchen. No one could guess from the outside that there was a first storey to the house. Bayaji had to make the best of things.

The house was complete and the traditional housewarming ceremony was planned. Invitations were sent to relatives in different villages. The village elders, by convention, could not be invited to a meal or refreshments, so they were invited to the ceremonial *paan-supari*. Bayaji put up a fine *pandal* in front of the house. His sons worked hard for two full days on the decorations. Relatives started arriving. Well-known devotional singers, Kadegaonkar Buwa, Parasu Buwa, Kalekar Bapu Master, Jija Buwa and Vithoba of Wadgaon came with their troupes. People looked forward with delight to the forthcoming contest among the various troupes.

In the evening four petromax lights were hung in the four corners of the *pandal*. It lent a unique golden yellow light to the surroundings. Guests were engrossed in conversation.

Kondiba Patil was soon there. With him was the thug Bhujaba and four or five seasoned rascals like Vithoba Ghayakute and Parasu Martanda. These people felt uneasy at the sight of the brand new house, the impressive *pandal* and the crowd of smiling faces.

Their eyes roved all over the place. Bayaji led them up the stairs in the kitchen. The first floor looked like a drawing room. The walls were radiant with blue oil-paint. The fresh colour gave out a pleasant smell. Framed pictures of great men like Lord Buddha, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and others hung on the walls. The loft-like first floor was filled with a pious and holy ambience.

Bayaji spread a rough woollen carpet for Patil and the other high-caste people. Patil sat quietly on that. His companions rather

uncomfortably took their positions around him; Bayaji offered them the customary betel leaves. Patil accepted the leaves but immediately gave it back to Bayaji with the remark, 'Yes, it's all very nice!'

'But why don't you accept the betel leaves?' Bayaji asked nervously. Bhujaba smiled artificially and said, 'It's enough that your offering is honoured; is it also necessary to eat it? We'll make a move now.' With this Kondiba Patil, Bhujaba and his companions rose to leave. As they came down, Bhujaba felt as if he were tumbling down the stairs.

They eyed one another as if to say, 'This untouchable worm has got a swollen head. He needs proper handling.'

Bayaji fed all his guests with a sweet meal of *shira* and *puris*. Along with betel nuts items of gossip rolled over their tongues and then the session of social devotional songs began.

Among the Bhajan singers, Kalekar Bapu Master had a superior voice. Kadegaonkar Buwa was better at classical singing. Devotional songs were sung in praise of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and Lord Buddha. People swayed their heads in appreciation as the programme gathered momentum. It was two o'clock in the morning. Bayaji was strutting about in the *pandal*. He sat down by a guest now and then, to inquire after his welfare. Small children, unable to resist sleep, had dropped off like bundles of rags. Women sat in the front verandah. Bayaji's children were busy preparing tea for a second round. They had put tea powder and sugar into a pot on a trenched stove and waited for the water to boil. The *bhajan* was in full swing. 'I had a dream at night and my breast was full of feeling,' went the line.

The group advanced from baseless devotionals — like 'From the east came a horde of ghosts, each one with seven heads' — to social devotionals.

Kalekar Bapu Master's powerful voice rose up, 'Take to heart the sweet advice of Bhimaraya and bow down to Buddha for the emancipation of the whole world. I fly to the refuge of Lord Buddha, I fly to the refuge of the Faith; I fly to the refuge of the Faithful.' The song rent the air, filling it with joy. And then the undreamt-of incident took place.

Bayaji's new house had caught fire from all sides. It had suddenly flared up. The womenfolk in the front verandah screamed in confusion. The guests stood up swiftly and began to pull out the women like a herd of cattle.

Bayaji was frantic. He ran around crying, 'My house, my storeyed house! It's on fire. My enemy has taken revenge on me.' He entered

the roaring flames, crying, 'My house, my house.' He climbed up, pulled the pictures of Buddha and Babasaheb from the walls and hurled them down. As he was about to come down the stairs, it crumbled down in flames. People pulled up water from a nearby well to put out the dreadful fire but it could not be easily contained. 'Bayaji, jump down, quick, jump,' people shouted. Women and children were crying and screaming. Now that the staircase had collapsed, no one could go up. Scorched in the flames, Bayaji ran around like a trapped creature, howling all the time, 'My house, my house!'

And then the upper storey itself came down with a crash, and along with it Bayaji, with a resounding thud. People pulled him out.

Bayaji was burnt all over. He was still wailing, 'My house, my house!' Bayaji's children encircled him and cried their hearts out. The guests were busy putting out the fire. All Bayaji's hopes had been reduced to ashes. What was the use of putting out the fire now?

Bayaji was badly burnt and he was in great agony. He asked for water all the time. As his eyes began to roll in his head, his eldest son moved closer, gulped down the sorrow that was surging in his throat and asked, 'Nana, what's your last wish?'

'Sons, I want you to build a storeyed house. I've no other wish.' With these words, his head collapsed like the storeyed house. Bayaji was quiet and the fire too had calmed down.

Bayaji's mother wept bitterly. 'Your father passed away without giving me a burial. At least your hands should have pushed the dust over my dead body. Bayaji, speak to me.' She was mad with grief.

Bayaji's wife was sobbing her heart out, crying repeatedly, 'Who's done this evil to us? Let the house burn to cinders. Save my husband first!'

The entire family was shattered by the calamity. The spirits of all the men were dampened like a cooking-fire on which water had been poured.

In the morning the village officers and witnesses visited the place to record the facts of the accident. 'Bayaji's death was the result of an accident due to a petromax flare-up,' was their conclusion.

The house was burning before the house-warming ceremony was over and Bayaji was in ashes in the cemetery instead of enjoying the comforts of a retired life.

After the funeral, people returned hanging their heads. All of them were pained at heart to think that having come to celebrate the housewarming, they had the misfortune to attend the funeral of the

host.

All were sitting in a sullen mood in the *pandal* when Bayaji's eldest son came out with three or four baskets, a spade, a pickaxe and a hoe. He outlined a square with the pickaxe and began to dig.

The eldest son was digging, the second was gathering the earth with his spade and the others were lifting it away in baskets.

The guests asked in amazement, 'Children, you are in mourning! What's this you're doing?'

'Our father's soul cannot rest in peace unless we do this.'

'But what is it that you're doing?'

'We're starting on a house, not one with a concealed first floor but a regular two-storeyed house,' replied the eldest son of Bayaji. And the six brothers resumed with determination the work of digging the foundation of a two-storeyed house.

Translated by M.D. Hatkanagalekar

YOGIRAJ WAGHMARE

Explosion

At twilight, Sheku was seen craning his neck and peering into the distance. He would walk a few steps forward and then return to sit under the tamarind tree. Since mid-day he had been watching the road intently. His mind was not at rest. Seeing some woodcutters returning home, bent under the weight of the bundles of wood, Sheku went up to them and said, 'Did you run into a young man on the way?' One of them replied, 'I saw some cowherds playing hide and seek. I wouldn't know if one of them was yours.'

'Well, he's not a cowherd, but a smart lad dressed in a white shirt and trousers.' But by the time he had said this, the woodcutters had walked away.

Sheku grew more anxious. He prepared himself to walk up to the outskirts of the village to take a look. He slipped his chappals onto his feet and set out.

'I had asked him to get back before it was dark, but there's no sign of him. He must've stayed there,' Sheku muttered to himself. As he walked ahead, he ran into Nama Bangar who was returning home with his cattle. Seeing Sheku he asked, 'Well, old man, where are you off to, at a time like this?' 'It's my son, sir, he hasn't returned yet. So I thought I'd go up to the outskirts to take a look.'

Nama Bangar took out his tobacco pouch. The two put a pinch of tobacco into their mouths. Nama spat twice or thrice and then went away. His herd had already gone a furlong ahead. Sheku looked westwards at the isolated path. His failing vision did not discern anyone coming up the path. The sun had set. The old man turned to go. He entered his hut and lit the lamp. The womenfolk were busy cooking the evening meal. Darkness had gathered outside. It was then that the old man saw his son coming homewards.

'Well, Shetiba, how late you are!'

'I started late,' Shetiba said, as he slung his bag on the hook.

'Did you have any company?'

'Yes — my friend Atmaram Shelke from Wadgaon was there. I

spent some time at his place, that's why I'm late.'

'Oh all right — have a wash and rest.'

Shetiba obeyed. By this time his mother had roasted some *bhakri*. The little ones in the house had all gathered round her and were looking on eagerly.

When she served Shetiba his dinner, all the children sat around his *thali* and began to eat. No one spoke. The calm silence was occasionally broken by the clamouring of the kids. Sheku could not bear the silence. What had come out of Shetiba's visit to the factory at Dhoki? Did he get the job? So many questions crowded his mind. Questions that Shetiba alone could answer. But Shetiba was silent. Sheku could not figure out what had happened. He longed for Shetiba to speak. He was yearning to hear of the outcome of the visit — not Sheku alone but his wife and Shetiba's wife Pami who had huddled into a corner in the darkness. Pami watched her husband, his head bent over his *thali*, washing down the few morsels salvaged from the claws of the children, with a sip of water. She felt uncomfortable that her husband would not talk about his visit to Dhoki.

Shetiba was still mute. At last, when he could bear it no longer, Sheku asked, 'Was the work done?'

The darkness in the hut grew more oppressive. The lamp flickered and stood still in anticipation. The children too shut their mouths. Pami and Shetiba's mother perked up their ears.

'No,' came the answer in subdued tones. He put away the morsel that he had raised to his lips and drank some water.

Shetiba's 'no' created sudden ripples in the silence. His mother sighed audibly. His wife wiped away a tear with the edge of her *pallav*. Sheku recovered and asked, 'What did the Saheb say?' 'There are no vacancies. There might be one or two next month.' Shetiba answered with his head bent low. As soon as he heard the word 'Saheb', he began to recollect the Dhoki factory environs — the bulky, gigantically powerful machines heaving non-stop, huge piles of sugarcane, labourers cutting the cane, others carting it away, lorries, bullock-carts, confusion, hurry and scurry. Shetiba stood watching all this, bewildered and scared. A thought crossed his mind — if the Saheb had given me a job, I too might have slaved here and all our household problems would have been solved.

Now he had come to the other side of the factory, where a lorry stood. Some labourers were dumping the dregs from the machine and the molasses into the lorry. Their bodies were layered with dirt. The

grooves of muck on their bodies glistened in the heat. They looked repulsive. Shetiba couldn't bear to look at them. He felt sick. He moved away with his handkerchief to his nose. Outside, near the gate, a signboard read, 'Wanted coolies to carry molasses.'

Shetiba started when he read it. And God knows why, he laughed to himself. His chain of thought was broken.

Shetiba's 'no' made everyone forlorn. It was three years now since he had passed the matriculation examination — and he hadn't got a job yet. If not as a clerk, schoolteacher, *talati* or *gramsevak*, he would get a job as a peon, Sheku had felt, and he spared no efforts, sent in applications by the dozen but he didn't get a job. He would return home empty-handed and dejected, braving himself to face another day. Yesterday he had been to Dhoki to be interviewed for the post of a watchman, but was not selected for the job. Sheku had hoped that things would look up after Shetiba got a job, there would be enough to eat and enough to cover their bare bodies — these were his dreams. At first, he hadn't minded much when Shetiba had failed. But now everywhere and every time the answer was 'no'. Sheku began to lose faith, his gossamer dreams began to fall apart and the sand under his feet seemed to slip. He was completely broken.

'What do you plan to do now?' Sheku asked suddenly.

'Wait for something else to turn up,' answered Shetiba.

'How long are we to wait? This endless waiting will kill us. Nothing doing, tomorrow I'm going to get you some work. We don't want this job of yours.'

The old man spoke desperately. Shetiba felt choked — he wanted to say something, but not a word escaped his lips. His father got up. Threw a mat outside the hut. Pami lay down beside the grindstone. His mother, brothers and sisters crouched under the meagre bedsheets. His poverty seemed to challenge Shetiba with a wicked grin. He sat leaning against the wall for a long time. A host of thoughts spawned in his mind and the silence seemed unbearable. He got up and lay down near his father. The night crept by like a slithering python.

Next day Sheku called some elders from his Mahar community. Bhiwa Gaekwad, Gangurde Satwa and Gana from the next lane came. Diga, Nivrutti and Sida from Kamble Lane were called too. Everyone assembled. Shetiba was reclining, brushing his teeth with a *neem* stick. Small talk was exchanged and then Diga Kamble asked Shetiba bluntly, 'It's a long time since you sent for us. Got a job or something?'

Shetiba felt disheartened at the mention of the word 'job'. But without showing his dejection he said,

'No! No sign of a job yet. Baba is the one who's called you, ask him.'

'Well, well, father and son don't seem to be seeing eye to eye,' Sida observed sardonically.

'It's not that, Uncle,' Shetiba said as he spat.

'Then what is it?' Sida enquired again.

'Look here, Shetiba doesn't know anything about this. *I* have called you. You see, it's like this ...' Sheku began to explain.

'There were forty families in this Mahar community. About twenty have gone to the cities, where they live from hand to mouth. Things are not what they used to be...' The men nodded in agreement. Sheku would not come to the point, so Gana impatiently interrupted him and said, 'What you say is true, but why are you beating around the bush? Go on, tell us what's on your mind.'

'That I will. Listen folks. When no other child from the Mahar community was sent to school, I sent Shetiba.' A murmur ran through the group.

'It's three years since Shetiba did his matriculation, yet he is without work. He's been desperately looking for a job, without success.'

Sheku had opened his heavy heart to the world and was giving vent to his bottled up feelings. Shetiba could not figure out why his father was placing his case before the *sarpanchayat.* He looked grim as he listened to his father.

'Now, we're going through bad times... We have to go without food for two days at a stretch sometimes. There is no hope of Shetiba getting a job, so I have turned to you in desperation. Give me my share of the *vatandari*. Do that somehow. I was wrong to listen to Shetiba and give up the *vatandari*. I'll set him to do the village duty.'

Sheku began to sob violently. He stretched his hands before the assembly for help. Shetiba felt as if he had been struck by a thunderbolt. This unexpected move of his father shattered him like a banana tree crashing in torrential rain. He felt he was being crushed under a thousand-tonne weight. Every word of his father cut into his soul. 'My children have been withering away like firewood and I watch helplessly. I can't take it any longer. I can't bear to see them writhing in hunger like fish out of water. Whatever happens, at least they'll get a few morsels, if he does the scavenging.'

Shetiba was dazed and bewildered by this decision; he began to tremble like a leaf. He couldn't think of what to say, his eyes emitted sparks of hatred, disgust and protest. Through trembling lips, he managed to mouth the words. 'Then I shall not stay in this house.'

'Where will you go, leaving your mother and these kids?' Shetiba asked, with a lump in his throat.

Away from you, thought Shetiba. The answer rose to his lips and faded. The defiant stag made a valiant effort to rise, but collapsed from the grievous wound inflicted on him.

His eyes, which had flashed fire, turned dim. His tongue seemed paralysed. All he could see was his mother sitting by the fire in rags, his half-naked brothers and sisters, his father shrivelling with age, all these like living corpses. The corpses suddenly besieged him. He wanted his young Panchfula to become a doctor. Vitthal would be either a lawyer or a district collector. Suma would be better off as a school teacher. He wanted to buy his Pami a nylon saree...

Shetiba did not eat that day, nor did he exchange a single word with his father. At night he ran a high fever. Sheku was awake. He got up and adjusted the tattered sheet on him. As he stroked his burning forehead, the heat gave him a shock. He was overwhelmed with grief and two tear drops trickled down from his eyes.

'I understand, son, I can understand your agony. I knew you'd resent this.' Sheku could not control himself and began to shake with sobs. The hut was quiet. The oil in the lamp was almost over. Shetiba turned over in his sleep, muttering to his father. 'Baba, don't do this to me. Don't ask me to do the scavenging.' Sheku quickly put his hand on Shetiba's half-open lips.

Shetiba talked like one who had yielded, given up the battle. His father, already wrung by poverty, began to cry silently. After a while he dozed off.

It was morning. Sheku's house held the pallor of death. Shetiba had left the house early in the morning — he had gone off. He had told his mother, 'I'll do any work that I get. Even carrying molasses.

Sheku was wildly beating his chest and asking his wife, 'Did you give him a morsel to have on the way?'

Translated by Lalita Paranjape

ARJUN DANGLE

Promotion

'I'm telling you, you have to do it.'

'No, I won't.'

'Look here, Godbole, the lady's on leave for two more days and this proposal has to be sent in today. Please get it ready. If you don't I shall have to...'

'You can report me if you like. I have told you a thousand times that this is not my job.'

'Have some manners and learn to respect your superiors.'

'I know you are my superior, but I am senior to you. Please note that.'

'Please get out.'

Waghmare drew a sheet of paper towards him to file a report against Godbole. He gulped down a glass of water. Putting together the report in his mind, he stared at the whirring fan above. Actually, there was no point in filing a report. He knew from experience that no action would be taken against Godbole. The entire department knew that Godbole was Joshi Saheb's emissary and carried his tribute every month to appease the powers that be.

No one ventured to make enemies with Godbole. Still, it was better to file a report. He would have a legitimate reason to offer if he were questioned regarding the delay in submitting the proposal.

He rang for the peon and asked him to bring two Banarasi 120 *paans*; he also asked him to tell Awale Saheb to come up for a cup of tea. The peon left. For some time Waghmare sat with his head in his hands. Then he rang again, expecting Mr Singh's peon to come in. He rang once again but no one turned up. He finally got up and walked across to Mrs Karnik's table, rummaged among the papers and retrieved the paper dealing with the proposal. Godbole sat sprawled in his chair and didn't budge an inch. Waghmare paused, wondering to whom he should entrust the work. Every table groaned under the heavy pressure of assignments. Really speaking, Godbole ought to have dealt with this proposal, since it came within his purview.

Wagahmare took the file inside and began reading it.

Suddenly the cabin door was flung open and Awale Saheb stormed in, in his usual fashion.

'Why, you seem to be mighty busy, eh?' he said as he sat down.

'Yes — that Godbole doesn't listen to me. From now on, I'll have to be prepared to face these hassles.'

'To hell with it. Why should you be doing his work? Give him a good hammering and get him to do the work.'

'No, he doesn't listen to me.'

'You're a timid bugger. Why don't you go ahead and issue him a memo instead of whining like this. Remember no one has obliged you by promoting you in the reserved category.'

'There's no question of an obligation, but relations get spoilt.'

'Does Godbole respect you?'

'He doesn't. And I suppose it's quite natural that he should resent the fact that I've been promoted to the post of Assistant Purchase Officer, though I'm junior to him.'

'Listen, it's only now that we are being promoted to the 'Saheb' positions in this 33% category. But remember these other people have enjoyed the privilege of being in the 100% reserved category for centuries. Doesn't that mean anything to you?'

'Forget it.'

'Forget it indeed! You'll wake up only when you are left high and dry with a pot slung around your neck.'

They had tea. Waghmare hoped Awale would go away. He always remembered Awale whenever he was tormented by problems concerning his caste. Awale lent him firm support but also distressed him further.

Chewing *paan*, Awale asked, 'By the way, do you deal with printers?'

'Yes. Anything to be done?'

'Nothing much. The Backward Class Workers' Association needs some receipt books for Ambedkar Jayanti.'

'No, that will unnecesarily create problems.'

'Are you aware of all that goes on in your Purchase Department? The Railways are being fleeced there — and you are scared of getting a few receipt books printed.'

'No question of being scared, but...'

'Forget it. By the way, why don't you attend the meetings of our Backward Class Association? Our people from the staff are upset

because you don't come.'

'Well — I've to attend to this proposal. Shall we meet later?'

It was well past four by the time Waghmare prepared the draft of the proposal. He decided to give it a final look in the morning and then send it for typing. Suddenly he remembered Godbole, but soon banished him from his mind. There was no point in tagging behind Awale. He would only make matters worse and people would humiliate him. Waghmare reminded himself that after all he was an officer now and had to maintain a certain standard. The wheels of thought began to spin furiously. He suddenly realized he was thirsty. He rang for the peon.

'May I come in, Sir?' asked Miss Godambe.

'Yes.'

'Sir, I'm going on three days' leave from Monday.'

'How can you take leave now? Don't you know Mrs Karnik hasn't resumed yet? Take your leave later.'

'No, Sir, I must take it now.'

'Anything special?'

'We're going to Shirdi.'

'Oh! Why didn't you say so in the beginning? Don't worry. Go ahead. And remember to offer an *abhishek* on my behalf.' He opened his wallet to take out the money.

'No, I'll make the *abhishek*.'

'Come on, take the money, otherwise you'll earn the merit instead of me,' said Waghmare, chuckling.

Miss Godambe left happily.

As soon as he put down the glass of water, the phone rang.

'Hello, Assistant Purchase Officer Waghmare here.'

'Saheb, I'm speaking on behalf of Chunilal and Sons.'

'Yes! Your work will be done. I have it in mind. When are you coming this side?'

'Saheb, why don't you come instead? Shall I send someone to pick you up?'

'No, not today. We'll see about that next week.'

'Right.'

'O.K.'

Waghmare felt elevated. Godbole vanished from his mind.

It was past five. The office was empty. Waghmare could have taken the 5.05 local. But he let that go.

All his old cronies travelled on the 5.05 in the second class. Now

that he was an officer he was given a first class pass. Awale was ill-mannered and coarse. Instead of travelling in the first class he travelled second class with his friends. Not only that, he had noisy discussions with them in the train. Wagh naare suddenly remembered his friend from his clerical days — Gaekwad. Gaekwad whose booming voice greeted him with 'Jai Bheem, Waghmare Saheb!' Waghmare shuddered at the thought. There was no reason why Gaekwad shouldn't say 'Jai Bheem' softly. Whenever Gaekwad thundered thus, Waghmare got the feeling of being closely watched by those around.

Waghmare entered the first class compartment of the 5.15 local. He got his usual window seat. There were four minutes to go. Just then, the man with *The Evening News* entered the compartment, panting, having had to run to catch the train. He plonked into the seat opposite Waghmare's, looked at him, smiled and said, 'You seem to have reserved this seat on a permanent basis. You always get the window seat.'

Waghmare started when he heard the word 'reserved.' He wondered whether his fellow commuter knew that he belonged to a scheduled caste. After assuring himself that he couldn't possibly know his identity, he pulled out *The Illustrated Weekly* and began leafing through the pages. Once again he felt he ought to change his surname. Akolkar would be the right choice, since he was from Akola.

By the time he reached the Officers' Railway Quarters it was five past six. He remembered that there was a Marathi film on TV. He quickened his pace.

The TV was on, with his wife and kids intently watching it. Waghmare changed and settled down on the sofa to watch the film. There was a knock on the door. His wife went to open it and ushered in a dirty, shabbily-dressed woman, accompanied by two equally unkempt children.

'Come in, the film has just started.'

Waghmare Saheb's face too turns dirty and unkempt. The film ends.

'Kusum, I'll take your leave now,' says the shabby woman.

'Have a cup of tea before you go.'

'No. He must have got up now. He's on night shift today.'

The woman and her children go away.

'Who was that woman?'

'She's my aunt. She lives in the slum opposite our quarters.'

'You seem to have specially invited them. Why didn't you receive them in grand style?'

'I'll tell you what happened. I met her when I was going to the market. She was always so good to me. She didn't know I lived here. I had met her after ages...'

'Come, don't get carried away. We don't live in the B.D.D. chawls. Next, you'll have the entire slum visiting you — what will our neighbours say?'

'Well, are they going to rob you?'

'Don't talk too much. Learn to maintain your status. After all, you're an officer's wife.'

Kusum burst into tears. She thought of her poor aunt who had loved her so much. She recalled being fondled and fussed over by this aunt. She wondered when she had come to Bombay. Her aunt was so near, yet ...

'Come on, serve me dinner.'

The memories of her aunt shattered into fragments as Kusum hastened to serve dinner.

'Didn't you buy any fruit?'

'No.'

'But you said you'd been to the market.'

'I did go; but the fruit was too expensive.'

Waghmare sat on the sofa. His five-year-old son came and laid his head on his lap. Waghmare noticed his bruised knee.

'How did you get hurt, Pappu?'

'D'you know that Pramod, who has a super Ganpati? His Grandma pushed me.'

'Why? Did you beat him?'

'No. We were playing and I drank water from his water pot.'

Waghmare's mind is filled with the image of Godbole. His newly-sprung wings of promotion fall off and a mere mortal named Pandurang Satwa Waghmare crashes helplessly into the abyss below.

Translated by Lalita Paranjape

BHIMRAO SHIRWALE

Livelihood

They poured out of the hutment blabbering. They shouted and ran about, chasing one another.

'Oh, oh, it was only yesterday that the girl got married, and today old Jankabai is dead!'

The widow Jankabai lived by collecting and selling burning coal dropped by engines on the railway line. And as the fire in the coal cooled, so did the fire in her stomach. But today, there had been a void in her belly. It had taken her off her guard and she had closed her eyes for a moment while picking coal on the railway line. And the monster-faced engine had gone roaring over her tired body, tearing it into shreds.

Yesterday Jankabai's Kashi had been married. Today Kashi had become an orphan. The daughter of the widow had been pushed out into the wilderness.

Not that Dharma wasn't a good man. He was a loafer who had made up his mind to walk the straight road. But while he waited for the chance to walk the straight road, he was hounded by the need to work and this drove him to doing all the crooked things ever invented. Jankabai had approved of all this and handed over her sweet, gentle Kashi to his care. His body was tanned black and had grown tough with hard labour. Hidden in his arms were strips of tensile steel. Jankabai handed her daughter over to him with great trust, and with equal trust slipped out of the world like a piece of *bhakri* falling through the fingers.

Kashi wept and wept and wept, and maybe because he was grieved or maybe because his wife was weeping, Dharma also wept. And soon the young couple steadied themselves on the tracks of life.

Dharma had some education, but no qualifications, and when he saw that even those who had qualifications lived like paupers, he despaired. He waited every day for a job. But his stomach would not wait. The fire in his stomach would rage and he would rage against himself because he had no work to do. Soon his rage grew to devour

his whole life. He had heard national leaders make speeches. He had read everything that came within his reach. But he didn't need to hear or read. Because the hutment colony in Koliwada had taught him a lot, made a scholar of him. The path it had shown him cut clean through good and bad, wicked and evil, right and wrong, ending in another world altogether. Therefore he thieved as well as laboured. Picked pockets and carried loads. Conned people, cheated people, slit people's throats. He did all these things because there was no alternative to living, and he had no wish to die. Live he must by whatever means he could. But pockets weren't always available to pick, or loads to carry.

It was now five or six months since Jankabai had died. What Dharma owned was this Rs. 20 a month hut in Koliwada, which was really like owning nothing. And all that he really owned, aluminium pots and pans riddled with holes, stood ranged in that hut.

Kashi was hungry. Dharma was hungry. No money had come in that day. Neither from a straight job nor from a crooked one. And the two were hungry. Just, simply, hungry.

Amongst these aluminium pots and pans was a brass pot. Jankabai had bought it for her daughter's kitchen out of the money she made from selling hot coal. A fire raged in Dharma's innards. There was no way he could live except by enslaving himself to somebody. Either wear another's collar around his own neck, or slit somebody's neck. But that day nothing had turned up, neither good nor bad. Suddenly he thought of the brass pot given to them by his mother-in-law. It dazzled his eyes like the philosopher's stone. He grabbed the brass pot with hasty hunger and ran all the way to the Marwari.

He entered Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand's shop. He had heard this man had saved many in the hutment colony. Dharma told him his tale of woe. In return Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand told Dharma his tale of woe.

'Look, brother. These are government rules. We can't keep pawned goods. Can't help you, brother.'

Dharma knew about government rules. But Dharma also knew that there had been no food in his stomach for two days. There was much distance between the government and his stomach.

He pleaded again with Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand. The Marwari said with great generosity, 'Look, brother, you know I don't like any crooked business. But since you are in need...I'll take this pot on my own responsibility.But you'll have to pay four annas interest

on the money. And you'll have to pay off the interest first. See if it suits you.'

Interest and principal and such mathematical words meant nothing to Dharma. He was beyond them. The rain poured outside, and inside of him struck flash upon flash of lightning. His mental faculties were concentrated in that single point within him, his stomach. He took twenty-five rupees at four annas a rupee monthly interest from Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand and ran to his hut.

Twenty-five rupees was equal to five days of life, and once again it was the straight road and the crooked road.

And then, for the first time in a month, Dharma had a decent sum of money on him. He would buy mutton and get drunk, he thought. And he would retrieve the brass pot from Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand.

But it wasn't meat and drink that lay in store for him.

He went to Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand to get his brass pot, but the man asked to see the receipt. Dharma had no receipt. The pot had been pawned against government rules. There was no receipt for such deals. Dharma tried one way and another to identify himself. He said he lived next door in the hutment colony. But the Marwari refused to part with the pot. And then Dharma lost his head. The hunger in his innards, the fire in his heart, the steel in his arms, all rushed into the blood of his blood-shot eyes and he went insane. In the grip of this monstrous passion he struck the Marwari, laying him flat. He kicked him in the back and twisted his arm right out of its socket. Terrified, agonized, the Marwari ran around screaming like the devil. Then he collapsed and died in the gutter. He died in the gutter and the good folk on the road caught Dharma.

Dharma left the Koliwada hutment colony to serve a sentence of twenty years' hard labour for murdering Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand. Kashi had no idea why people went to prison, or how or why they continued to live there. She was turned into a column of fear, an uprooted tree. She wanted to know how she was going to live.

The dawn broke. A Bombay dawn. This dawn doesn't break with the crowing of a cock. It breaks with factory sirens, the shattering thunder of trucks, milkmen, vendors, newspaper boys. Their raucous voices together wake the Bombay sun. It was dawn and Kashi still lay awake in her rented hut. How was she going to pay the rent now? How was she going to live?

Kashi's young, nubile body was not as fair as the core of the

turmeric plant, but it was fair. It was not as sculptured as a statue, but it was delicately chiselled. Kashi had not been aware of these things when Dharma was around. But when Kesu Ghatge the bootlegger came to console her with a ten-rupee note first thing in the morning, she knew that life without Dharma was going to be dark and dangerous.

'Kashibai, you are like a sister to me. Dharma was a tiger of a man. But you'll be all right. I'll look after you. Here. Keep this money.' And before she could say yes or no, Kesu Ghatge the bootlegger had gone.

Kashi felt Dharma's absence acutely. But not so the day and the night. Day followed night and night followed day. And destitute Kashi held on to life in that little hut. Every breath she drew was a question, shall I live or shall I die? And on that breath she continued to live. And the bootlegger Kesu Ghatge continued to visit her every other day to give her a little gift and to tell her she was his sister.

Kesu Ghatge was a bootlegger only in name. He'd once really been a bootlegger. But his business had folded up under the double burden of customers' credit and cuts to the police. Because he did not pay the police on time, he'd once been beaten up good and proper and sent to jail. The beating had torn a tendon in his right leg and blinded him in one eye. He had come out of jail just before Dharma went in. He came out dragging his bad leg and flapping his bad eye. He had once been the *dada* of Koliwada. Now he scrounged for scraps. People feared him for his hideous face. He had never wished anyone ill, but the hooch trade had finished him off. He'd become strange in his ways after he came out of prison. He didn't give a damn about anything. He would get up in the middle of the night and start raving. His neighbours feared him then because he talked of taking revenge and of killing people. At such times, he would fly at the throat of any person who came his way. He didn't want to live straight. The wish to live decently was dead in him. When he was drunk he talked of ripping the world open with his knife. He was involved with innumerable petty crime gangs. He would pick pockets and thieve and break into houses and gamble. He would go to the Dadar and Boribunder stations to carry luggage, and give the owners the slip and go and sell off their stuff in Chor Bazar and get drunk on the money. And then he'd talk about taking revenge.

There were times when Kashi used to feel terribly scared of the bootlegger Kesu Ghatge. But he used to call her his sister. This put

her mind at rest. She had tried to earn her living by working. She had managed to get a house job through some women she knew. She washed and cleaned for a retired gentleman. She worked at this job for fifteen days. Then one day, the old man took advantage of their being alone to make a pass at her. That was the end of her ideas of earning her own living. But it wasn't the end of living. And bootlegger Kesu Ghatge continued to come with a fiver or a tenner and his hideous face and his dead eye flapping...holding out a helping hand to her.

And one dark night, when Kashi was fast asleep, Kesu Ghatge entered her hut. He came in and lunged at her body like a starved man going at a plateful of the choicest food. Kashi woke up with a dreadful fear in her heart to see Kesu Ghatge trying to rob her of her virtue. He had called her 'sister,' but her young body made him numb with desire. An unsuspected strength flowed into Kashi's body and she fell upon him, fighting and clawing. At the height of her fury and her fear she grabbed the still smouldering brazier and flung it at him. He screamed like an animal and ran out...

Next morning Kashi woke up with fear in her heart. But there was no sign of bootlegger Kesu Ghatge. A whole day passed and she felt easier in her mind. But four days later people began to look at her differently. They hadn't looked at her like that before, because Kesu had always been there, invisible but menacing. Now they fearlessly made passes at her and tried to trap her in their net.

God knows what happened then, but Kashi began to rock like a raft caught in a tempest. Where was the mast, where the rudder, where the coxswain...where was Dharma? I will remain true to him, but who will help me remain true to my honour? How can I keep this body, made sacred by Dharma's touch, safe from ravishing hands? How can I retain the impress upon it of his steel-muscled arms? It is beyond me now. I cannot do it. I need help. I need help to live to see Dharma in twenty years. Kesu wasn't bad. But he was shrewd. He was a traitor. He was dangerous. He said I was his sister and tried to dishonour me. But then he helped me a lot too. Maybe because he wanted to dishonour me. But he was someone to depend on. At least he kept those thousand lust-filled glances from barring my way. You need someone to support you. Strong. Powerful. Huge. Like steel. Like Dharma. There was only one other like that — Kesu. But Kesu looked like a nightmare. Like a monster. So what? He's strong. He has power. People are scared of him. I should have made him my own. Instead,

I threw burning coals on him...Kashi was caught in the turbulent conflict of overwhelming feelings. She could find no way out. Where was Kesu? Had he been arrested? Or was he...

Then unexpectedly one day, a month later, Kesu Ghatge the bootlegger came and stood in her doorway like a nasty dream. He stood smiling faintly. With his bad leg and his blind eye, and now his skin in white patches like dermatitis where the coals had burnt him that evening. He looked repulsive, monstrous.

And God knows what happened, but it was as if she had suddenly remembered her humanity, and she fell upon his neck, humble and sad. She wasn't deterred by his terrifying looks. She shut her mind to his cunning, his treachery, his dangerousness. Just out of hospital after a month's treatment, Kesu Ghatge the bootlegger became Kashi's man.

She now forgot all thoughts of good and bad, right and wrong. There was only one valid motivation. The stomach and support, and both these were in the hands of Kesu Ghatge. In a way she was his wife. In a way she was his mistress. To prevent people's tongues from wagging, they set up home under cane matting on one of the least frequented pavements in Colaba. Nobody went that way. This was good.

But Kashi saw in Kesu Ghatge none of the fight for work that she had seen in Dharma. She used to get after him to find a job. Sometimes he'd say yes as a joke and sometimes seriously. But nobody wanted to give a job to someone who looked so hideous. So he would go and get drunk. And then he began beating Kashi. He looked upon her healthy youth with suspicion out of his own deformed apology of a body. The sap and fire in her body still remained unexhausted. And this bred strange perverted thoughts in him. He tried to make her ugly. Around the same time Nature carried out her major function. Bootlegger Kesu Ghatge's seed began to germinate in her womb. They had spent nights of starvation themselves. It was too much to expect food to be created for this unborn life. And Kesu, still haunted by perverted desires, continued his attempts at mutilating Kashi's beauty. And in her womb, that accursed seed continued to sprout.

And then one day, Kesu reached the top gear of his perverted desire. He kicked Kashi, grown languid with pregnancy, and stuffed lime into her eye. Jankibai's darling daughter became blind in one eye. One eye closed forever and Kesu sighed with pleasure and then began to laugh like the devil.

Kesu had no job. If he found one he'd brawl and abuse and soon be out of it. Crime had now entered the marrow of his bones and every vein in his body. There was no way out of it for him now. One day he was caught by the police trying to rob a young couple somewhere near Marine Drive. He was tried and sentenced to three years' rigorous imprisonment. And when Kashi came to hear of this, the shock of it caused her foetus to slip out of her womb before the nine months. Her neighbour on the footpath helped with the delivery. Kashi regained consciousness on jaggery-sweetened tea from the Irani shop and a *paan.* And with tender love she took the tender life that had come from her womb into her lap. But when she looked at the child, her eyes stared wildly. The child had been born without shape or form. Every bit of Kesu's monstrosity was reincarnated in it. The head was outsize. The upper lip was missing. And the only sign of a nose were two holes. With a distended stomach and limbs like match-sticks, the creature bore no resemblance to humanity. And it had begun to scream from the moment it was born. Kashi grew fearful of the child's terrifying ugliness. She saw in its noseless, lipless face an image of Kesu's cruel face, and she felt the urge to strangle it on the spot with her own hands. Anger, fear and the love of a mother all attacked her at the same time. But she did not kill the child, because she couldn't. She couldn't even suckle it because it had no upper lip. She squeezed the milk out of her breasts, which were brimful for who knows what pleasure, into a cup, squeezing herself dry while the weird child yelled and screamed and grew.

She had no support now, no help to live. And there was nowhere she could look for help. She would leave the child on the pavement like a grub scrabbling in muck, and go out begging.

But begging is like a magician's art. You need skill and experience for it. She didn't have these. Before she knew what she didn't have, she decided to sell her body. A body off a pavement sells cheap.

But her body too was not saleable. It was loose and flabby now. Looseness is fatal to men's sexual desire. That is what went against her. 'She's too loose, the bitch. She's an old jalopy.' And the decision which she took as a last resort bore no fruit. She began to starve. Food was hard to come by.

When she thought of the repulsive child and of Kesu Ghatge's face, her brain would splinter like glass and scatter all over her body. She tortured her own body, because she was unable to find some other body to torture it. In despair she took to begging again. She put the

weird child on her lap and sat begging on some unknown pavement.

Many people passed by, Indians and foreigners. And they threw coins at her, five paise, ten, twenty-five, fifty. She gathered together her earnings in the evening and found she had fifteen rupees in her bag. She had never before seen such a sum in one day's earnings. She went out the next day and the next and came back with fifteen rupees and some days twenty, and became accustomed to the work. This was a strange revelation in a strange world, that her earnings came out of the weirdness of her child. People threw coins on account of the terrifying ugliness of that baby's face. She realized that he was the trump card in her life.

Kashi, who had once wanted to strangle the baby, to demolish every sign of Kesu Ghatge from before her eyes, to revenge herself on him, now began nursing the child with tender care. She bought baby foods and tonics for him, and he began to thrive like a huge baby owl. And the more he thrived the fuller became her bag with coins. Then one day, she bought a hut.

Just as the skyscrapers went up one by one they brought up in the crooks of their arms a rash of huts and that is where she had bought herself her own hut.

Once Kashi fell ill. She couldn't take the child out to beg. Soon the other beggars in the colony were queueing up at her door. They hired the child for five or ten rupees, sometimes even for fifteen or twenty to take it out begging. And she realized that this son of Satan must be circulated. He must reach every house that survived on begging. She was ill in bed for a month and she made fifteen or twenty rupees a day on the child without moving a muscle.

Night followed day and day followed night. Three years went by like a pilgrimage to Kashi-Benares, with God showering his graces on her. Then that incarnation of the devil, Kesu Ghatge, came out of prison like an enraged tiger let out of a cage.

He came out and went to the old pavement. He didn't find Kashi there. She must be dead, he thought, and prepared once more to kill and to die. He got involved once more in all his old activities, coolie work and conwork. And he won and lost as of old and beat up people and got beaten up by people.

And then like a star shooting out of a pitch black sky came the news that Kashi was alive in a hut at Nariman Point. Living it up in fact, on the earnings off the child of his loins.

Like a wolf that goes sniffing after a goat, he went in search of her

and one black midnight entered her hut, drunk. There was a light on in the hut.

'Aei Kashe!'

Kashi snored peacefully, and the sound of her snoring made the veins in his neck swell.

'Aei Kashe!'

This time his voice was a roar. She started up and seeing him standing there she thought it was the devil himself baring his fangs at her. She screamed.

'Who..who's that?'

'Your mommy's husband.'

And she felt as if, on this hot night, a chill had entered her body. Her body began to tremble. Every part of her shook. And suddenly Kesu Ghatge went absolutely still. The eyelid over his bad eye flapped and he smiled faintly. This made her tremble. Her heart had reached the point where, like a piece of elastic, it could be stretched no more. And it frightened her. She felt her heart would now be torn into shreds. She suddenly began to pant. Her chest heaved asthmatically. And out of that pair of bellows in her chest sprang a flame of fire.

'Why have you come here?'

Kesu Ghatge flared up under this attack.

'You bloody bitch...'

'If you'd had any decency, any shame, you wouldn't have shown your face here, you bastard...son of a bitch.'

'Mind your tongue, you whore. I've come to claim my earnings.'

'What earnings? You hadn't given me your mother's cunt, had you?'

These words acted on Kesu Ghatge like a foot falling on a snake's tail. He roared and ran at her. Kashi's screams woke the entire hutment colony, which came pouring out in the middle of that night. Everyone asked everyone else what was happening. One, a beggar, blind in both eyes and drunk to his teeth, went berserk with rage and writhed this way and that on the ground abusing everybody. Kesu Ghatge kicked the old man. And the old man rolled on the ground howling.

Seeing the people gathered around, Kashi found courage. She screamed like two cars colliding at top speed.

'You ghoul, why do you beat a helpless old man?'

'You whore, I am also blind, though only in one eye. Now hand over my earnings.'

The people stood around watching. Kesu looked so terrifying that nobody dared interfere.

'What earnings, you bastard?'

'My child...'

And then Kashi knew that he had found out the source of her livelihood. I nursed the monstrosity he planted in my womb and now he's come to lay claim to it.

'What child?'

'There he is, my Hanumant, on the cot. He's mine and you'd better give him to me, you slut.'

'I carried him in my stomach for nine months, carried this burden, and then spent my life's blood looking after him from the day he was born, and what's your claim, you bastard, to this child?'

Unexpectedly then, Kesu turned towards the residents of the hutment colony.

'My good folk, this is the child of my loins. This is my wife. So what if she brought him up? A bitch nurses her pups and makes them big. But it's the master who owns them finally. I am her master and her child's master. But I'm not laying any claim to her, mind. All I want is to take away what is rightfully my income.

'That's my child. And this whore won't let me have him.'

Both because it was past midnight and because the reaper of the harvest was indeed the sower of the seed, the good folk supported his claim. And anyhow they had not been very pleased with Kashi's doing so well for herself, and wanted to see her fall. Their convention-ridden minds grabbed the opportunity to see this happen. Kesu was triumphant. Like a victorious candidate in an election, he forced his way into Kashi's hut and laid her flat with a massive kick on her face. Kashi stumbled into a corner and collapsed. Bootlegger Kesu Ghatge picked up the hideous child. Putting his weird offspring on his shoulder he emerged from Kashi's hut smiling triumphantly. What he had on his shoulder was his livelihood. What Kashi had lost was her lifetime's livelihood.

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

BABURAO BAGUL

Mother

The children looked up — backward children with their peaked, ragged faces — at the teacher. The poem was about a mother, and they remembered the warmth of the mother's lap, the only place where they ever felt secure. The teacher's voice went on, soothing, melodious, and they were transported to a new joy of being. The children, usually quite indifferent to school, smiled happily through their unkempt hair; their muddy faces shone with a strange wonder. The teacher's song-like voice rose higher and higher, and then it was all over. The sound of the bell broke in harshly and the children were pulled back from their brief moments of joy, and this strange new wonder was lost. Very soon, the children went back to their usual antics — the pummelling and the shouting, the scuffing of feet, the fights and the swearing.

The poem continued to haunt Pandu, however. He started thinking of his own mother as 'Vatsalya Sindhu' — a river of motherly love and benediction — just as the poet had done. He was finally convinced of her greatness. The heavy burden he always carried on his shoulders lifted somewhat and he was a child once again, wanting to shout, to run and wave his arms about in joy. The hostility that he usually felt towards his classmates abated somewhat. He sat watching them at play, and a benign smile slowly came to his face.

It was a strange sight to see. Pandu never smiled, never mixed with the other children. The children were puzzled. Lakhu would often drive Pandu out of his wits with his venomous mischief. But today Pandu laughed at his antics and Lakhu was pleased. 'Snotnose!' they shouted together at another boy. Very soon, however, Pandu himself became the target of their mischief. Kisan yelled cruelly, 'Don't touch Pandu, any of you. My mother says Pandu's mother sleeps with the *mukadam* like this...' He puffed out his chest and cheeks and stood tall in imitation of the hefty overseer. The class was convulsed with laughter.

Pandu slowly went back to his seat, and sat down woodenly. All

around him, obscenities were being bandied about. He had no father, and now everyone was saying that his mother was a whore. The boys around him repeated the gossip they'd heard at home. Pandu was confused. He started defending his mother stoutly. His mother must be something special. The children didn't quite like this — their anger mounted. Two of them pushed Pandu hard. There was a big commotion as they all tried to punch him, one after the other, and through it all the bell announced the end of the school day. They hurriedly snatched up their slates and tattered books and ran out of class.

Bhaga put up his shirt collar, however, like a street rowdy, squared his shoulders and through taut lips told Pandu, 'You bloody pimp. Just come out. I'm going to murder you.' He removed a rusty old blade from his notebook and threateningly placed it at Pandu's throat. Then, with a whistling movement Bhaga turned around, and like Jaggudada, the bad man of the community, swaggered out. The gang was waiting for him outside. They shouted out their abuse against Pandu's mother, and Bhaga made obscene gestures.

Pandu's face burned with shame and anger. He felt a demonic, murderous rage rising within him. He could have killed them, murdered them all in cold blood. It was good to think of them lying together in a pool of blood. It was a short-lived joy, however. He remembered that he was an orphan, now that his father was dead, and his mother an unprotected widow. He was afraid that Dagdu, their neighbour, would pick another fight with his mother, try to strip off her sari... Rage gave way to infinite helplessness and he felt spent.

The gang was disappointed when they realized that Pandu was no longer interested in exchanging abuse. 'Coward!' they yelled at him, 'Petticoat! Sissy pimp!' The gang slowly started towards home.

When Pandu saw that Bhaga and his gang had left, he slowly left the classroom, took up the books that now seemed enormously heavy, and with leaden gait entered the untouchable quarter. But when he saw Bhaga playing marbles at the end of the street, he lost nerve, and at last, with fear constricting his heart, made the long detour that finally took him home. With a diving movement he entered their little room and waited anxiously for his tormentors to reappear. When no one showed up for a long time, he felt the beating of his heart gradually subside, and he realized that he hadn't eaten since morning and was ravenously hungry. He sat near the mud stove and drew the bread basket closer. Two or three cockroaches spilled out; he shivered in

disgust. One by one he opened the other pots, but all he got was the stench of putrefying food and the swarm of flies that buzzed out uncertainly. Pandu's eyes slowly welled up with tears, and he started sobbing quietly into his shirt front.

...My mother has certainly changed, she is not the mother of old. Last night I waited for her return for such a long time, but she didn't come on time. She was so, so late; and when she did come she didn't say a word to me, never kissed me once. She went straight to cook, served me supper silently, and then went to bed like a small child, talking to herself, smiling quietly to herself. She didn't sit by me when I ate, didn't ask me how I was. Wasn't it the same this morning? She bathed early in the morning, wore a new sari and blouse, and then sat holding the mirror in front of her for hours. She turned the mirror around and looked at herself from all angles. What else did mother do? She slowly caressed her own arms and breasts...she played with the new silver chain around her neck. Pandu had seen her tying and untying her tight *choli*.

As he remembered one by one her actions of this morning, a slow fearful suspicion suddenly gripped his heart. It was true then, perhaps the overseer was her lover. His heart started beating loudly; he no longer felt like eating. To keep himself from worrying about it, he took his schoolbooks and slate and sat near the door, reading — his usual practice. But he couldn't concentrate. The thought of what the children at school would say to him the next day worried him. He thought wildly of running away from the shame and dishonour. He now felt like rolling in the mud, weeping and wailing loudly. But he was afraid that if he started crying, the women in the street would wonder why. They would come round to see what was wrong, and would start abusing his mother in front of him. He was desperately trying to hold down the sobs that threatened to overpower him. And he was also praying fervently for her return.

He was staring at the crowds in the street, his eyes searching for his mother. Dagdu, already dead drunk in the late afternoon, came up to him swaying dangerously. He stared at Pandu, and spat disparagingly. 'The whore of a slut! You're shameless enough to make the rounds of the shops with that pimp, with your child sitting alone at home! If that was what you needed you only had to tell me — I'd have obliged. And here I've been burning with desire for you, all these years... But now...'

As Dagdu continued abusing his mother, Pandu burnt with an

impotent rage. He lost his childlike feelings as the murderous fires continued to haunt him; he felt like hurling a heavy rock at Dagdu's swaying, retreating form and his mind's eye was luridly coloured by the spraying blood that he imagined would gush out of Dagdu's head. He trembled with revenge and anger, and suddenly the full import of what Dagdu had said, at last dawned on him. Like a short puff of air, his anger and hatred towards Dagdu melted away, and he thought, disdainfully, that Dagdu was undoubtedly right. Fear, anger, contempt for his mother slowly formed within his mind, and one by one he was forced to answer so many questions about her...Is that why she is always late nowadays? Was that why she was late last night? And will she come home tonight or will she run away for ever like Gangu next door? And what will happen to me? How will I learn to live alone?

The questions tormented him, and he could control his tears no longer. 'Mother,' he screamed and threw himself on the ground with a heart-rending cry. He held his hand over his mouth to suppress the sobs, but the neighbours heard and one of them ran in.

'Listen all of you! That shameless tart's little one is crying. What's the matter?'

'What?' A few more women came out, showed him sympathy and stood about abusing his mother.

...At that very moment, she was rushing towards home with lightning steps, knowing he would be hungry, and waiting. Her steps slowed down as she saw the gang of women, her envious enemies waiting at her doorstep. She was now sure that he too had turned against her, joined the enemy ranks. Didn't she have proof now? And suddenly he seemed to her like his cruel, alcoholic, deceitful father. Anger quickened her steps, and she rushed towards their little room. The entire street was transfixed by her undulating walk. The men stripped her bare in their mind's eye, the women burned with envy, but couldn't help looking. Dagdu slowly called out 'S...l...u...t!' and the women laughed in derision. It was obvious that Dagdu wanted to pick a fight.

Pandu's mother, secure in her new-found love, rejoicing in the great physical prowess of the overseer, burned with anger, but walked straight, and threaded her way through the hostile crowd. The women started hurling abuse at her, and Pandu forgot his sorrows and sat up. His new-found knowledge enabled him to see her tightly worn expensive sari, the careless confidence, the defiance in her walk; her

lips, which he now considered evil, reddened as they were with betel juice. He was convinced of her guilt; his mind was already willing to take sides against her.

She noticed at once the suspicion in his eyes, the glance that took her in from top to toe, and her love, her concern for him slowly turned to rage. At that moment he looked exactly like his TB-ridden, suspicious, nagging father. In his eyes she could feel again the accusations that her husband had often levelled against her. The memories of all the physical and mental torture she had undergone were very painful, hard to forget. Pandu now looked exactly as his father had done years ago.

Pandu was just an infant then. The kitchen fires had to be kept going, and he needed medicines, and milk and fruit. All day she would work at the construction sites, hauling bricks and cement. On her return she would glimpse the same dark suspicion that stared out of Pandu's eyes at this minute. She was beautiful, desirable, which automatically meant that perhaps she consistently sold her beauty, gave it away for a price. His eyes would follow her, watch her every movement. And then he would begin the most degrading act of the day, something that gave her nightmares even now. He would strip her and examine her feet, her thighs, her breasts, her sari and blouse, and would carefully scrutinize her lips and cheeks. His eyes would constantly seek proof, proof of her infidelity, proof that she was indeed an adulteress. And often those suspicion-ridden eyes would perceive a change in the way she looked at him. Or the way she walked, or…or…In great fury he would ask, 'Your sari looks as if you've worn it in a hurry, your hair's coming loose, where were you, slut?' He would search her again for the money he thought she was earning the easy way, and when he found nothing, he would taunt her, 'Giving it on credit now, are you?' His blows were always aimed at destroying her full-blown beauty. He hoped she would lose a lot of blood, become lame or deformed, ugly, and so, in spite of his ebbing strength, he would aim at her face, her nose, head, eyes. Then he threatened to kill her when she was asleep. He blamed her entirely for his disease, his failing strength, his joblessness. Once, out of sheer desperation, she had pleaded with him, 'Let's go to the village. The men here harass me all the time and so do you. The village air will do you good. Forget your differences with your brother. Let's go back.'

'How dare you remind me of that swine? Temptress, witch! I'll die, allow this child to die, but I'll never let that pig near me.' He held her

responsible for his estrangement from his brother, for hadn't he looked at her with lust in his eyes? They had to come away to this great metropolis after he had almost killed his brother with an axe. Later, he would detect desire in the eyes of every man who as much as glanced at her. He got into fights over her; became tuberculous. As the disease advanced, he lusted after her body even more avidly; the suspicions grew wilder and the accusations more preposterous than before.

One night she suddenly woke up from a deep sleep to find him heating up the iron tongs in the fire; he had taken away the clothes from her body. She froze in horror as she realized that he had wanted to brand her naked body with the hot iron. From then on, she actively wished for his death, and demanded her conjugal rights even when she knew he was indeed close to death, hoping to thus hasten it. A few days later he died, and she felt guilty, as if she had sent him to his early death.

She had suffered immeasurable torment after his death. Men were drawn to her; she did not want them. They tried rape and their women waged a war of slander against her.

...The suspicion in Pandu's eyes took her back into the past, but she was jolted afresh into the present by Dagdu, who now sat on his porch hurling abuse at her lover, the overseer. Pure hatred towards Dagdu and her own weak son coursed through her body. She wanted to kill them all. She walked up to Dagdu and shouted: 'May you get leprosy! May the worms eat up your eyes and nose, you pimp.' She then turned from Dagdu and the full force of her fury found its target in Pandu. 'Die, you bastard! Like your father who died of his own evil.' Pandu felt his mother did not need him any more — she had murdered his father and would murder him. He felt he would have to leave this place, soon. He got up, but couldn't hold back his tears; he hid his face in his shirt front and cried piteously.

Then she suddenly saw him as he really was: totally vulnerable, totally dependent on her, even as his father had been before him. She noticed his thin, spindly arms and legs, the concave stomach, that now lay exposed, and the whitish pallor of his skin. A nightmarish thought suddenly struck her; did he have TB too? God forbid! She rushed up to him, 'Have you been coughing? Tell me son, do you feel feverish? Don't be stubborn, tell mother.' But he refused to answer her desperate queries; he was longing to cry in peace, and run out of the house if necessary. He had been torn apart by suspicion. For the last

six months, ever since she had met the overseer, it was true that she had neglected him; she hadn't even touched him. The loneliness of the past ten years had made her vulnerable, and now she could only think of the overseer's strong arms. She wanted to hold Pandu to her, but her lover had been very demanding; she could hardly move. She suddenly remembered the new clothes she had bought him.

'Son, forgive me. Look, I've brought you some new clothes. Wear them and come eat, son. Forgive me, I'm just an old silly.'

It was good to look at her tear-filled eyes. He looked at the clothes. There were two sets; and there were a couple of saris for her as well. The new clothes reminded him of last Diwali. He had worn new clothes, but the neighbours hadn't liked it. How could a poor widow's son be allowed to wear new clothes for the festival?

'Good for you!' They had jeered at him. 'Your mother's "business" seems to be doing very well. What a great rush there must be. Five rupees for each customer.' And when he had retaliated, Dagdu had rushed at him. Mother had heard the rumpus and had run out. But Dagdu had held her tight and throwing her to the ground, had almost succeeded in removing her clothes. Pandu had picked up a big stone, and had thrown it with all his might at his mother's tormentor. The neighbours had gathered round to break up the fight. Since then, he had stopped wearing new clothes. Now, as he glanced at these clothes, the cruel words that he had heard last Diwali came back to haunt him: 'Your mother's "business"... big rush... five rupees for every customer...'

The love that he'd just begun to feel for her again, started melting away. Perhaps she had really gone to the bad now. No point in staying here any longer. 'Come, son. Put on these clothes and come eat, she was pleading with him. But he was disgusted at the thought of his classmates jeering at him, abusing her in front of him. He couldn't take it any more. 'Whore! I spit on your clothes,' he shouted and ran out of the house. Her pain knew no bounds. Was she finally being made to pay for her sins? She had spent ten long years as a widow, and had tried so hard to love Pandu, she'd lived only for him, till the overseer came along last year. She had lost her husband, and now her son had turned against her. She started crying helplessly.

It was close to midnight now. She had locked the door, afraid that Dagdu would come in and molest her, and was waiting silently for Pandu's return. After a while she started muttering slowly to herself. 'Son, you called me a whore and went away. You hurt me more than

your father ever did. Was it for this that God sent you to me? You've all tortured me — you, your father, the men in this street — also the women. For you, I waded through hell. Do you know something son? I was beautiful, and after you father's death, Mohammed Maistry was prepared to make over his car to me if I agreed to marry him; Walji Seth would send a fifty-rupee note through a messenger every Saturday night and ask me to go over to his bungalow; and even Dagdu was prepared to give me his life-savings. I could have lived a merry life, but I gave up everything, son. I lived for you, hoping you'd grow up, be my support, but you have betrayed me...'

The room now seemed to her like the cremation grounds — everything was so still. She felt so alone, afraid that Dagdu would come, would try to rape her. And at that instant she felt that by locking the door she had turned away her son for ever. Perhaps he would come, would find the door locked and would go away. She heard the sound of the dogs in the distance, and thinking he had come back, joyfully opened the door.

'Come son, forgive this old sinner.'

The door opened and the overseer stood in the doorway. His massive frame seemed to dwarf everything else in the room.

'What's happened? Why do you look so scared? You're sweating.' He hugged her, pretended to wipe the sweat off her face, and started caressing her arms and breasts. She slowly responded, and out of the hunger of the past ten years of widowhood, flared an uncontrollable desire. And that was why she failed to hear the timid knock at the door, the faint, hesitant cry, 'Mother!' He saw them, his mother and the towering figure of the overseer in a tight embrace. His last hopes seemed to crash about his head; broken-hearted, he wildly rushed towards the door. She saw him then, ran after him calling his name but the overseer, already blinded with lust, refused to let her go; he was pulling her into the room with his strong brown arms.

Pandu was running away at great speed; his fast falling tears had almost blinded him, the stray dogs ran at his heels, snapped at him and now he was screaming, shouting with terror, afraid of the dogs...

She was trying desperately to escape from the bear-like hug of the overseer. But like a person stuck fast in a quagmire, she found release impossible...

Translated by Mira Manvi

AMITABH

The Cull

'A cull... a cull!' The clarion call rent the air, and men and women, rubbing the sleep off their eyes, rushed out of their mud hovels like hens fluttering out of their coops when the shutters are opened. Those sleeping out in the yards were quick on their feet. They were all ears. Dawn was breaking into the first glow. With their tin pots filled with water some were heading towards the scrub for their morning ablutions when they heard the cry.

'Who says there's a cull?' said the old woman Bulkai.

'Don't know!' Rodba replied.

'Who says there's a cull — could be a fib to hassle us!' commented Nagai, another old woman.

'Come on, who says ... ' Bulkai shrieked.

'Oh, that Dhondya, Dagdya's son...'

'What does he say, how does he know?'

'He just came from the scrub. He met Pandya Padewar and his son, they were dragging the cull to the scrub,' said Warlya.

The news of the cull spread like wildfire throughout the Mahars' shanty town. Everyone was talking about it, asking the other, 'Is it true?'

'What beast is that?'

'How do I know?'

'O Dhondya, do you know what beast...' Dagdya asked Dhondya.

'It's Timaji Patil's cow — the sacred one! Pandya said so as he was dragging it away.' said Dhondya.

The news set the whole shanty town in hectic motion accompanied by shrieks and shouts. Old Bulkai said to Rodba, 'What are you waiting for, come on, be quick, there won't be anything left for us!'

'Look, I have to go to the toilet first.'

'Oh, can't it wait? Forget about it on a day like this!'

She collected two knives and took the only tin trough she had, the one with a hole plugged with a rag. She pushed a reluctant Rodba in front of her. Both of them started towards the gum trees. Rodba took

his tinpot filled with water.

Old Nagai noticed them and yelled at her son, Dajya, swearing at him and pushing him towards the gum trees. Seeing that he was not quick enough for her she took the basket and scurried towards the gum trees, stooped in the back as she was. She blabbered all the way. Now Dhondya and Dagdya stirred. They sharpened their knives on stone, brandishing them like sabres, testing the sharpness on their own fingers. When their knives were sharp enough they started towards the scrub with their palm-leaf baskets. One after another, the whole colony was now on the march — Warlya, Chindhya, Chindhi, Ughdya, Godi, Lahanya, Barkya — everyone, with whatever container he could find: basins and baskets, creels and crans, troughs and trugs, tall aluminium pots, flat plates woven out of palm leaves, earthen pots. Ughdya's son, Kisnya, was the smartest; he reached there first, ready with his knife and trough.

Vithi had a large brood: three sons, three daughters, the youngest still a suckling. Her asthmatic husband coughed and coughed. He couldn't hold any job so she had to feed all of them somehow. Children came in quick succession — the next as soon as the previous one was weaned — there was no break. She was utterly fed up, but was there a way out?

They all sailed in the same boat; on whose shoulder could she cry?

'Nilya, Nilya,' Vithi called out to the eldest. He didn't seem to take any notice. She pulled the rag cover off him. Her movement ripped the already frayed rag. That further angered her. She pulled Nilya up into a sitting position. He flopped back amongst the covers, his eyes still closed. He had been reading till late night in the light of the kerosene lamp. But she had to wake him. She gripped him under the arms and made him stand up. Then she splashed a bowlful of water over his eyes. He grumbled and swore at her, screaming, 'Why me, why wake me up so early!' But who had the time to put up with his tantrums? Someone had to go and fetch a potful of flesh that would feed the family for the next few days. Nilya tried to shirk the job — he moaned and groaned. So she brought a heavy arm down and thumped him hard, pushed the tall metal pot, with a hole plugged with a rag, into his one hand and the knife into the other. She shouted her threat, 'Go get a potful or there'll be no food for you … I'll hang you by your toes.'

On the scrub under the gum trees were gathered all the Mahars from the shanty town. Each carried a knife and some kind of

container. Some made do with a broken piece of a mud pot or a rag. Some didn't have even that, so they would have to carry the meat in the folds of the dhoti or sari they were wearing.

Pandu wedged the carcass of the cow between the two gum trees. He and his son Somya started skinning the carcass with their knives. Everyone scrambled nearer, either standing or squatting on their haunches. Pandu wasn't going to let anyone touch the carcass until he had skinned it carefully and taken his share of the meat. He was careful. No cuts, no tears; he must have a nice, clean, complete coat of the hide. With his professional skill he was skinning the beast with careful but confident strokes of his knife — the four legs first, then the tail, the bottom and the neck. Then he skinned the belly and the back. His hands were covered with blood. He had no shirt on; his dhoti hitched round his waist was smudged with blood. No time to bother about that! For the whole of last month there had been nothing, nothing at all. This was a long awaited chance and he didn't want anything to go wrong.

Surrounding him they raised a din, sharpened knives in their hands, and took position, ready to strike. Kites and vultures perched on the gum trees. Some hovered in the air, fighting in flight. The flutter of their wings, their shrill shrieks had attracted all the dogs in the village. They barked and growled, some waited expectantly with their legs tucked under, some haunched on their hind legs, craning their necks, with tongues lolling and dribbling. They pushed themselves as near as they could. Whenever someone noticed that they were too close, he would chase them away with a stone.

At last the skinning was over. Pandya and Somya cut open the belly carefully. The blood spouted in a stream and showered those around. Somya held his trough near the spout and collected some. Warlya pushed his trough, he got some too. Somya now took out the innards and plopped them down. Then he cut out the liver, put it into his second trough, took out the lungs and the heart as well. That filled both his troughs.

Then he sliced off a thick steak from the ham and heaped it onto the trough which was already filled to the brim. He covered his troughs with the neatly folded hide, put away both his knives, looked around to make sure he had not left anything behind and walked away with the troughs on his head.

As soon as Pandya and Somya were out, others, like sanguine Rajput warriors, pounced upon the prey, raising a full-throated battle

cry. Baija, Old Bulkai, Rodba, Shirpat, Barkya, Warlya, Chindhya, Bhimi, Chingi, Chindhi, Namya, Tukya, Kisnya, young and old, all marched forth, flashing their knives. Everyone had an eye on the thick thighs and buttocks. They pulled and tugged at the carcass. Tens of knives were sawing at the chest at once. Whatever piece, small or big, they could manage, they cut and put into their containers. The knives slashed and sliced, chunks and chunks of meat were piled into the hampers and baskets. It was a free-for-all. It was no use brawling, yet abuse was bandied around freely, along with pushing and shoving. 'Oh, stop it! Watch it! Stop pushing, you, pick from where you are!'

'Why bicker, no one's stopping you from cutting.'

'O Barkya, give me a small piece, come, put a piece into my basket, Kisnya!' Old Nagai was pleading and begging on her knees, occasionally swearing at someone. Nobody gave a damn. They were too busy with their h nds and mouths. In the fierce competition the old and the weak were out.

In the circumstances, there was no way the birds and the beasts could get anywhere near. Vultures, kites and crows were squawking, screeching, fluttering their wings; mangy dogs were howling, barking in protest, wagging their tails ingratiatingly; what else could they do?

Nilya, far from nimble, didn't even know which piece to go for and how to cut it. Yet pick he must, fill the tall pot, for he was under threat. Alternatively he would have to beg from door to door or, worse still, just go hungry. If he were to collect more maybe... he began to daydream... a big earthen pot filled with meat, salted, cut up, dried in the sun just as in Hatya's house. Nilya's mum roasting a couple of pieces on open fire, just for him! and then Nilya munching them, savouring the dry meat — Hatya need not brag any more!

Nilya, a knife in one hand and his tall metal pot with a hole plugged with a rag in another, was standing with sleep heavy on his eyelids. He couldn't reach the cull, for there was such a scramble. Wherever there was a little gap he tried to push inside but someone would shove him, he would lose his balance and fall down. He would get up, only to be pushed off again and again. It just wasn't possible for him to do anything.

Kisnya had his trough overflowing. He looked up at Nilya standing there empty-handed and felt sorry for him. With his knife he cut off a few chunks of good thick meat and threw them at Nilya. 'Come on, Nilya, take them, put them into your trough, you son of a bitch.' The pieces fell into the dust.

Old Bulkai bent over to reach for them. Kisnya snarled at her, 'Move aside, you old hag, let Nilya have them.' Nilya picked them up from the dust, shook off the dirt and put them into his pot. Kisnya pushed the crowd aside to make room for Nilya, but the heaving crowd closed the gap before Nilya could plant his foot inside. He was thrown back.

The carcass was a mere skeleton of bones now. All the meat had been scraped off the bones. They were all covered in blood as if they had played Holi. Their hair was red. Their limbs were red. The dirty rags they wore were red. From top to toe they were all dyed in the same colour — red.

Then they started to trail back home, with freshly butchered red meat still dripping blood in their troughs and trays, bowls and baskets, pots and pans, rags and panniers. Excited and contented, towards their homes they marched.

The kites, vultures, and crows now sprang into action. The dogs, alerted, attacked the skeleton. The crows hovered over the heads of the people going home and swooped down on the troughs they carried on their heads. The kites and the vultures, emboldened by the sight, dipped from the gum trees onto the troughs and baskets. They watched from above the walking meat cargo and flocks and flocks of them converged onto the target. Crows carried off pieces in their beaks, kites and vultures in their claws. With these they flew to the gum trees to savour the catch. The men and women, used to such attacks, held onto their baskets and troughs tightly with one hand and with the other brandished their knives and twigs picked on the way to ward them off.

Nilya chased off the dogs and threw stones at the curs that dared bark at him. If he threw stones at the kites and the vultures they flew off only to return the next moment. Nilya searched for meat he could saw off with his knife, but it was a tough job. Holding his breath and clenching his teeth, he scoured whatever he could. Shooing the dogs away, he hacked off pieces and put them into his pot. Tense all over, he worked hard. The ribs had little meat on them and the chunks that Kisnya had given him were the only good meat, the rest was all bones. But he wasn't wise enough to understand that. Suddenly a crow darted and poked at the cow's eye. While trying to shoo him off Nilya saw the cow's tongue lolling down. Surprisingly nobody had noticed it — may be the cow had kindly saved it for him, he flattered himself. With all his might he cut it off and put it into his pot. Two dogs were fighting

over a thigh bone and in the tug of war they dropped the bone. Nilya hurled a stone at them and as they scampered off he picked up the bone. There was a bit of meat on it, so he put it into his pot. Contented that he had more than enough, he got up and put his knife away. Carrying the pot on his head, he started walking towards home.

The birds and the beasts stirred again. Crows pounced on his trough. Nilya picked up a twig and brandished it over his head. Kites and vultures were quick to join the crows; one of them swooped down. In trying to chase them off with his twig Nilya started losing his grip on the pot. So he threw the twig away and with a firmer grip with both his hands he held the pot tightly. He quickened his steps. Now the dogs were at his heels, barking. As he ran, he tried to ward off the dogs and the birds. Suddenly he stepped on a bramble bush. He fell over and the thorns pricked him. As he was trying to recover his balance, the vultures came down heavily and the tightly gripped pot on his head fell off. The meat pieces scattered into the dust. Dogs pounced on them. Crows clamoured for them and managed to snatch a few. Vultures and kites carried away a couple of them. A dog made off with the bone it had lost to Nilya before. Nilya, still unable to get up from the brambles, threw stones at them and tried to shoo them away. But the dogs took away the bones. Nilya's feet were bleeding with the thorn-pricks. He couldn't move his legs. But he had to rescue his pot, with whatever was left in it. The dogs might dare to carry off the pot as well! Nilya pushed himself towards the pot, he stood the pot upright. He brushed the dust off the chunks and put them into his pot. He seemed to forget the pain and his bleeding feet as he collected the bones covered with dust and heaped them into his pot.

The birds are still hovering over his head, swooping and pecking, the dogs are barking. But Nilya is busy filling up his pot.

Translated by Asha Damle

KESHAV MESHRAM

Barriers

Zingu crossed the railway gate and walked on, his eyes wandering here and there. If he met a well dressed man, he bowed to him, addressing him as 'Dadasaheb', and proceeded briskly on his way.

His manner of walking seemed out of tune with his scrawny build. Perspiration welled up on his face. As he walked he kept lifting the hem of his dust-stained dhoti held together by knots. His shirt, too, was full of holes. He carried a roll of bedding under his arm and a thick stick in his hand. His dhoti had turned almost black from wiping away sweat and dust. Dirt from the road and the layer of fine dust thrown on him by passing cars and trucks had turned his naturally dark skin an unsightly colour.

Narayan followed his father, carrying a thick gunny bag in his hand. He was as dark as his father but he was quite tall and well-built. He had visited Murtijapur twice — once when he was in the fifth standard and again when he was in the seventh. So he wasn't as awe-struck as his father at the sight of the district town.

The school in his village had classes only up to the seventh standard. There were just about seven or eight households of neo-Buddhists in Dadhi village, but their enthusiasm for educating their children was great. Everyone in the village insisted that Narayan be sent to Murtijapur for his further education. They said that he could stay comfortably at the Gadge Baba hostel.

Since the decision, his mother Sitalabai had been crying for days because her dear son was going to live all alone, away from her. 'Is my one and only son too much for you to feed?' she reproached her husband, driving him mad with her incessant wailing.

'Be quiet. Are your wits better than mine?' Zingu, already half sick with worry, growled even louder at his wife.

'But won't you listen to your betters at least? Deshmukh's wife said that...' Again and again Sitalabai urged her husband not to send Narayan out of the village.

The mention of Deshmukh's wife softened up Zingu a little. 'Well,

what does she have to say?'

'The poor thing was thinking... Her sister's at Nagpur. They've got a big bungalow and motor car. The boy could make himself useful about the house. He could study too.' Sitalabai was carried away, pleased that her husband was listening to her.

'Now what's this new thing you've come up with?' said Zingu, confused. 'Just the other day you were saying there's work.right here, in the Deshmukh field and farm house.'

'But you wouldn't agree to it,' said Sitalabai, gesticulating at him. 'What's the use of learning so much? If the boy has to be sent away he might as well be sent according to the wishes of those who have fed us for generations.' And Sitalabai stopped, heaving a great sigh.

Deshmukh had also tried advising Zingu. From Zingu's father's time they had served in the house of the Deshmukhs, who had helped their family in times of need. On festival days they were given new clothes by the Deshmukhs. Every other day, they were given buttermilk, and sometimes curd. They had standing permission from the Deshmukhs to take away cakes of cowdung fuel. Zingu was not prepared to accept that such a generous patron would not think about his interests.

But for the last two or three years there had been huge gatherings here and there. The speakers had told the neo-Buddhists to throw their idols into the river. A crowd too huge for the gaze, large enough to tire your eyes, had assembled in the village Dadhi-Pedhi. Zingu had not seen such a large number of people since his childhood.

'People who worship animals but treat human beings like beasts — they do not belong to us and we do not belong to them.' Resolutions and speeches on such themes were made. The rich and the high caste people did not stir out of their houses for three or four days. It was a new discovery for the seven or eight Mahar households of Dadhi village, that those whom they had feared since their childhood were equally afraid of them and of those who spoke on their behalf. Although three days before, Devake Saheb had described the gods as monkeys and pot-bellies, he was neither struck down with fever nor was his body pierced by divine wrath. He went on giving speeches everywhere, sometimes on foot, sometimes by bullock cart, bicycle or even a snub-nosed jeep. Seeing all this, they felt as if they were living in a new village. They had a chance to experience something novel.

For a month the atmosphere of the village seemed fresh and new. Then habit, need and poverty brought them back to where they were

before. Rituals began again, though without the idols. Fasts, Mariai-worship, incense-burning, festivals, fairs, the Govind Maharaj feast day, the birthdays of Dr Ambedkar and Hanuman were once again celebrated. The Deshmukhs and the Kulkarnis breathed a sigh of relief. They were happy that the people remained the same in spite of changing their caste names.

Zingu, however, was determined to educate his son. However much Deshmukh reasoned with him, he wouldn't listen. 'Saheb, the two of us are here to serve you till we die. Let the boy go out. Let him see this new type of *raj*, this democracy, the one you mark with a cross.' Zingu was firm in his decision.

Finally it was discovered that the headmaster at Murtijapur was really a relation of the Deshmukhs and Deshmukh gave a sealed letter to this relation, Dongre Saheb. Deshmukh's wife too gave a letter addressed to her brother. Guarding those two letters as if they were a hundred-rupee note, Zingu had reached the *taluka* town at noon.

As they walked they came to a well where the two of them stopped to slake their thirst. There was quite a traffic of women to and from this well. Whenever a woman came there, Zingu approached her with cupped palms in the hope of water to drink, but the woman would draw water for herself and go away. After about fifteen minutes Zingu was given some water.

'Narayan, my child, have some water,' said Zingu, glancing fondly at his son, who sat apart looking glum. But Narayan shook his head.

'Don't you want some water? You've been asking for it for quite some time,' said Zingu, surprised. He wiped his face and hands with the end of his dhoti and started walking ahead.

'You go on. I'll follow you,' said Narayan to his father. Zingu thought that Narayan wanted to ease himself, so he went forward slowly.

The sun was declining in the sky. The shadows of the trees had lengthened and twisted. A dog ran up panting, raised its leg and pissed an oblation on the edge of the well. It thrust its head into a half filled bucket of water and happily took a drink. Then it bit at its own tail, screamed at itself and scampered away. Narayan enjoyed the sight.

Narayan put aside his bag and got up. He threw out the rest of the water from the bucket. He propped his left foot on the parapet and lowered the bucket into the well. Slowly he drew it out, then washed his hands right up to the elbows, washed his face and his feet, wiped his feet with the cloth round his neck and tied it around his neck again.

Just then a shadow fell across him. 'Who're you?' A fair old man with a Brahmin's top knot and bare to the waist asked him.

Narayan went and put the bucket near the well. Then he looked at the old man and smiled. Pressing the muscles of his arm, he said,'Baba, I'm Narayan Zende from Janata High School.'

'Good, good,' said the old man, contentedly nodding, and twisting his sacred thread. Narayan smiled again.

Zingu was watching all this from a distance, his eyes popping and his heart palpitating. Narayan hastened his steps to catch up with his father.

'Narayan, my dear boy, you shouldn't do things like this. Suppose someone had seen you and caught you? It isn't good to be bold and forget our station in life. It's a sin — you can go to hell for it.' The words broke out of Zingu as if he were suffocating. Narayan said nothing.

At last they reached Headmaster Dongre's house. A message went in that someone had come from Nanasaheb Deshmukh of Dadhi village. Dongre came out and enquired, 'Who're you? Are you Zingu who's come from Bapu?'

'Yes sir, that's who I am,' said Zingu, bowing low from the waist, with folded hands. He gently put down the two letters on the step.

'Vatsalabai, bring the silver bowl,' Headmaster Dongre called out.

'Sit down, Zingu, you must be tired. You've been sent all the way by my sister and brother-in-law.' At these words Zingu bowed again from the waist. Narayan, who was standing some distance away, was astonished at the welcoming note in the words. He came a few steps closer.

Headmaster Dongre had now noticed him. A question rose in his mind about who this boy could be, his height equal to Dongre's own. The question broke out onto his lips. 'Has my brother-in-law employed a new farm-hand?' He said to Zingu, pointing towards Narayan.

Zingu hurriedly stood up again. 'No sir, he's mine. He's my son Narayan.'

'Really?' said the headmaster.

A middle-aged woman hurried out. There was a silver bowl in her hand.

'I've brought the cow's urine,' she said. The headmaster dipped his fingers in it. He flicked a few drops here and there and scattered a few on the letters lying on the veranda. Then returned the bowl to

the lady, who quickly went inside.

The headmaster read both the letters again and again, his expression continually changing. He had the habit of winking with his left eye. From time to time he kept looking at Zingu, and then glancing at Narayan.

'Well done, Zingu. You've really got guts. That's a clever piece of thinking. We'll take good care of your young master Narayan,' he said, nodding.

Zingu had conveyed something to Narayan while the letter was being read. Narayan nodded. At the headmaster's words Zingu got up again. He smiled, contorting his body in a queer fashion. And repeatedly bent down to salute the headmaster. Narayan came forward and joining his hands, said, 'Namaskar, Guruji.'

'Why, the boy's accent is really pure. He's smart,' said Headmaster Dongre, looking pleased.

By now the darkness had thickened about them. Vatsalabai had brought out food served on leaf platters. Dazzling white rice. Hot millet *bhakris*. Pounded chutney. Hot *zunka* with linseed oil poured on it. Zingu and Narayan gratefully ate their fill.

There were two aluminium pots filled with water. Zingu put the pot to his lips and drained it. Vatsalabai refilled it with water from the earthen water pot. Narayan raised the pot but poured the water into his mouth from above, gulping it down in a steady stream, his throat bobbing up and down as he drank. Vatsalabai stared at his throat and bare chest. They washed their hands, cleared away the leaf platters and went to throw them away at a distance. Two or three dogs dashed up hopefully. But the leaf platters, wiped clean of food, must have blown away with the wind, for hardly had they turned their backs, than the dogs ran barking in a different direction.

Telling the headmaster again and again to look after Narayan and reminding his son that a guru was next only to God, Zingu had turned back to go home. For a long time the noise of the barking dogs came through the darkness. Then that too quietened.

With his father's departure Narayan felt a great emptiness. For a while he was numbed. He could see or hear nothing. The light outside the house had been turned off. Inside, the headmaster had sat down to his evening meal. Narayan was to stay there in the night and set out for school next morning for which the headmaster was to make the arrangements for him. For a long time Narayan sat clutching his roll of bedding. It made him feel as if he were lying asleep in the crook of

his father's arm.

Good arrangements had been made for Narayan at the hostel. The school too was good. Narayan had been admitted to Standard VIII C. He was the tallest and best built of all the boys in classes eight and nine. On the first day many boys asked him who he was and asked him his date of birth. Narayan Zingroji Zende, 4 July 1945. There was an expression of wonder on the boys' faces as they realized that this strapping champion of a boy was only twelve or thirteen years old like themselves. But apart from his size, he seemed just like one of them. One or two of them struck up a friendship with him.

'It's a good thing you are built like this. These wretched boys may look small but they're little thugs. If anyone gives me trouble, you'll hammer the fellow, won't you?' said Sampat Karhade, putting a friendly hand on his shoulder. 'Let's be friends too,' said Ashok Savji, introducing himself.

A few days went by. There was to be a speech by Raghba Kamble at the hostel. Raghba Kamble was a smiling man who had lost the use of a leg in battle at the height of his youth. He was head of the Backward Castes Association of Akola district. His chief occupation was to tell students about the new ways of thinking, and to explain Buddhism and humanitarianism to them in simple language. He used to make the boys laugh so much at the anecdotes he told that not just the backward caste boys but the others too were mad about him. His name commanded respect in schools and colleges. The inspector of police used to snap out a salute on seeing him and the *tehsildar* would stop his car for him.

Textbooks and notebooks were distributed to the boys in the hostel. Raghba Kamble's address had been written up on the hostel notice board. He looked after matters in Akola and Amravati districts. His train, the Bhusaval Passenger, arrived late at the station, and so Narayan, who had gone along with a few boys to send him off at Murtijapur station, reached school late.

As Narayan hurried towards his class, the headmaster appeared in front of him. Narayan tried to hide but was unable to. 'Stop!' called the headmaster and Narayan halted, his head lowered. 'Is this the time to come to school? Is the free food you're getting making you oversleep? You people are the government's sons-in-law, aren't you? Freeloaders, one and all!'

Headmaster Dongre was tearing a strip off Narayan, who tried once or twice to offer an explanation but the headmaster's voice was too

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loud. His Marathi teacher, Agashebai, came out of the class for a minute but went in again.

During the next period, Narayan went and sat quietly on a bench at the back of the class. Karhade and Savji tried very hard to get out of him what the headmaster had said but he wouldn't tell them. 'I'll tell you later,' was all he would say.

When the Geography lesson was over, the peon brought a note. His teacher, Kakade, told him that the headmaster had summoned him after school ended and signed in acknowledgement and returned the note with the peon.

With lowered head, Narayan explained the reason for his lateness that morning and asked for forgiveness. Some thought appeared to be going through the headmaster's mind as he listened.

'Look here, this is your punishment. You're to come to class fifteen minutes before school begins. You're to sit on the bench at the back. In the lunch break you're to go to the station to drink water. Ten minutes after school closes, you're to see me before leaving.'

Narayan nodded. At first Narayan was happy that the headmaster had given thought to his studies. But he could not hear too well from the bench at the back. It was a strain to walk ten minutes to the station in the noontime sun. But he was determined to earn the headmaster's approval by working out his punishment to the letter.

One day, he had come early as usual when the school peon came and told him that the headmaster had called him. He went.

'Narayan,' said Headmaster Dongre, 'There's a lot of work I want done.' Narayan nodded.

'Our cook at home has called you. Go and see what the matter is. Take your books along with you.'

'Sir, I can come this evening, straight from the hostel,' said Narayan.

'No. It must be something important. Go right away.'

Narayan went, but reluctantly. As he got out, Ashok Savji was coming to school. Ashok gave him an enquiring look, which Narayan answered only with a finger pointed at the headmaster's room.

Narayan trudged his way to the headmaster's house but when he reached there, there was no one at home. Just as he was deciding to go back, Vatsalabai appeared, carrying a water pot.

'Oh, you've come. I just went to relieve myself. Planning to go away, were you?' She put the water pot outside, took up some ash and went inside to wash her hands.

'What's happened is that a cart full of firewood arrived yesterday. There aren't too many logs. It was I who told Dadaji, "Narayan's a sweet-natured boy. I'll look after everything."' She spoke as if she were talking to herself. As she spoke she gestured to him to follow. In a large courtyard behind the house, a heap of firewood lay under the shed. She gave Narayan a *ladoo* on a castor leaf and fetched an axe for him.

Narayan looked at the heap of wood and then at the lady. She was leaning back against the door, one foot propped on a high log of wood. Narayan took off his shirt. He took out his pencil from the pocket of his shorts and put the pencil and his books away to one side. He ate the *ladoo*. 'Just wait, I'll bring you some water.' The lady brought some water in a bowl. 'Take that water pot,' she said, pointing towards a dented aluminium pot.

With a great deal of force, Narayan hit a log of wood with his axe. That aluminium water pot was the one the lady had just used for her ablutions after relieving herself. What's more, it was the same water pot from which he had drunk at his meal on the first day. Narayan declined the water with a gesture of his hand. Chips of wood flew fast and furious. By three o'clock he had split the entire heap and made a neat pile of them. He was soaked in perspiration. In the past few hours, the lady had come out several times, stood watching for a while and gone in again. The school peon had come and taken away the headmaster's lunch box.

Narayan did not put his shirt back on, but wet with perspiration as if he had just had a bath, had wrapped his books in his shirt and was walking back to his hostel, bare to the waist.

Anusuya Chabukswar, a tenth standard student in his school, was looking at him with a strange expression in her eyes. She was the daughter of Raghbadada Kamble's sister. She too had been to the station the other day.

Narayan had won all the events at the school sports — long jump, high jump, running and wrestling. The name Narayan Zende was well-known to the five hundred or so students in the school. This new boy from a small village had smashed all previous records. The students were all talking about how the school would shine in the district sports. That whole week Narayan was drunk with excitement.

After much entreaty Narayan went to Sampat Karhade's house. Sampat's mother listened to the news of all his exploits with interest and affection. Sampat told his mother that since his friendship with

Narayan had begun, no one had picked on him. His mother brought some bananas in a plate and gave them both milk to drink. As Sampat bent to pick up the plate and glasses, his mother said, 'Let it be, I'll do it myself. Just give Narayan company till the end of the street.'

Though Narayan said, 'I can manage on my own,' he liked this courteous custom of giving a guest a send-off.

As they turned to leave, they heard someone saying in a harsh voice, 'Where do you think you're going?' Narayan said, 'See what it is, I'll be off.' And saying his goodbye, briskly walked away. 'Useless brat, you've defiled our entire clan! You smuggled in this arrogant, lying, thieving outcaste. He's a Mahar and he had the nerve to draw water from the well and drink it. I just learnt about it.' Sampat Karhade's father had him by the scruff of the neck and was dragging him along. The dismayed and bewildered Sampat was allowing himself to be dragged, yelping like a reluctant puppy at the end of a string.

* * *

Headmaster Dongre saw to it that Narayan was kept too busy to stay in class. Once he gave him the job of cleaning out the sludge from the well in his courtyard. Narayan was hard at work in the well from morning to night. Food was thrown to him from above. He ate his food right there and drank the brackish water of the well to quench his thirst.

The various teams of the district sports meet had left for Amravati. The headmaster stated that the dates for the individual events had not yet been received. The sports festival came to an end. All the boys were surprised that this year, for the first time, the post office should not have delivered the letter giving details of the individual events.

Raghbadada had come to Murtijapur. He was to visit the school along with the deputy education inspector. Narayan had told him about everything that had been happening. As he told how he had not been allowed to participate in the sports meet, his eyes had filled with tears. Narayan, who usually did not allow his emotions to show, shed tears in Raghbadada's presence.

Anasuya Chabukswar too had some complaints. Headmaster Dongre used to teach her class too, and used to make fun of her spelling and punctuation in the whole class.

'So what's this lady to do if she matriculates? Become a scholar like Pandita Ramabai? Or marry another Baba Ambedkar?' And he would wink in emphasis at the words 'bai' and 'baba'.

Raghbadada listened quietly to all this and then said, 'Children,

our day will come. If a mouse never leaves his home for the mountains how will he ever see the sky?' With quips like this he made the children laugh while he smouldered inside. He gave Narayan a fountain pen as a present, without there being any specific occasion for it.

Raghbadada Kamble slipped into Headmaster Dongre's office. The peon politely told him that the headmaster was busy, as the deputy inspector was to visit the school that day.

But Raghbadada said, 'What's this, Headmaster? You seem to be very hostile to our children. It doesn't injure just them, but the school, the district, and the country too!'

At Kamble's abrupt plunge into the subject, the headmaster was flustered. 'Which children?' he said.

'Chabukswar, Zende, Zinzade, Gaikwad, Kathane, Khobragade — how many names do I have to tell you?' Kamble knew exactly what he was talking about. 'And Headmaster, remember, Deputy Inspector Gavai is my brother-in-law. If you go on showing hostility to our children, make jokes about Babasaheb Ambedkar and his wife, prevent prize-winning athletes from entering sports competitions — it'll not just be a transfer for you, but the law of the jungle. It may be a democracy, but the next example of wrong-doing will mean a big stick. And if it's serious wrong-doing, the house at Dadhi will be ashes!' Kamble's threat had the finality of an ultimatum, sharp as the blow of the sacrificial axe on a buffalo's neck at Dassera. And he walked out with measured steps.

For a couple of weeks after this there was no summons from the headmaster for Narayan. All the other children were envious of Narayan. They had imagined that it was out of special affection that the headmaster called him so frequently. Narayan just smiled at this.

One day while he was having a drink from the school tank, Headmaster Dongre was making his rounds. He did no more than look at Narayan. Flustered, Narayan had greeted him but his gesture drew no response.

Narayan entered the classroom. He was sitting in the front row next to Savji. Agashebai was teaching them the lesson entitled 'Indian Culture' by Sane Guruji. Narayan was writing something in his notebook. It was hard to concentrate on Agashebai's teaching that day. He had been feeling quite upset since meeting the headmaster's gaze.

On his way back to the office, Headmaster Dongre passed Narayan's classroom. The squeaky noise of his shoes filled the corridor. Then he halted and turned back. His steps came towards

Class VIII C. He came into the classroom. The entire class rose and greeted him. 'Namaste Guruji.'

At a gesture from him the class sat down. He often made a casual visit to a class in this manner. Agashebai went on teaching.

'"We have inherited a great legacy worth teaching the entire world,"' Agashebai was saying in a high-pitched voice. As Headmaster Dongre was leaving the classroom he stopped for a moment at Narayan's bench. He had a good look at the pen in Narayan's hand and peeped into his notebook. 'What's this you've drawn?' His voice boomed out, sudden as a drum-beat. Agashebai stopped abruptly. And all the students started staring at Narayan. 'Nothing, Sir, nothing,' said Narayan, rising, his notebook covered with his hand. 'See me in my office before you go home,' ordered the headmaster, his former grim expression restored to his face, and he went out.

'What've you been up to?' asked Agashebai. 'Nothing, nothing,' said Narayan, shaking his head violently. 'Who knows what you've done to annoy him?' said Agashebai, pulling the notebook away from him.

Her face fell. She returned the notebook to Narayan and said to the children, 'I'd like you to read now, I've got a headache,' and she sat down on the chair. In his notebook, Narayan had written 'Indian Culture' and then 'Sane Guruji'. There were no further words on the rest of the page. He had not taken down a thing Agashebai had said. He had just used his pen to draw a picture of a donkey.

In the evening Headmaster Dongre said to him, 'Don't draw such stupid things. And don't use a pen. You'll spoil your handwriting.' As he spoke he was briskly signing, one after another, the papers on his desk, reflections of light gleaming from the cover of his pen.

Narayan nodded. 'Don't draw anything like that again... so, will you come to my house tomorrow morning?' Narayan nodded again and left the office.

When he went to the headmaster's house the next morning Dongre was about to leave for school. Narayan sat down on a block of stone in the veranda. Vatsalabai had brought him some tea in a thick broken cup without a handle. Narayan said, 'Sir, I just had some tea. If I have any more it'll kill my appetite.'

'Why don't you have it since it's offered with such love?' Vatsalabai had taken the cup from Dongre's hand and gone inside. Narayan gazed at the retreating cup, so delicate and milky white, and drank down his tea in one angry gulp and banged down the cup. 'Just see to

things in the house,' said Dongre, 'I'm off.' He put on his coat and went off to school, his shoes crunching the ground.

Narayan spent that day at Headmaster Dongre's house, reweaving tapes onto the cots. Vatsalabai moved around him, addressing him caressingly. Narayan did not eat any lunch. Although Vatsalabai asked him many times, 'Shall I serve you lunch?' Narayan said each time, 'No, I'm fasting today.' Finally she stopped importuning him.

There was a bustle of dusting and tidying at the school as preparations for Gandhi Jayanti got under way. The classrooms gleamed with cleanliness. Speeches were learnt by rote. The political leaders of the village dressed themselves in dazzling white and moved cautiously through the different neighbourhoods. A special programme had been arranged at the hostel too. The teachers and the villagers were to visit the hostel along with the chief guest.

Raghbadada Kamble too had arrived. Anasuya, looking very grown-up in a white sari, handed out flowers to the guests as they arrived. Some guests took the flowers from her smiling; others avoided touching them. There were speeches by the leaders. Raghbadada too gave a speech of gratitude. He declared emphatically that men everywhere were the same. There was a rattle of applause. But some of his listeners sat with stony faces.

Headmaster Dongre was cracking jokes as he accepted a *jalebi* from Narayan's hand and ate it. He was chatting with the others present. The *jalebis* had been sent by the local Gujarati Samaj and it was Kamble who had asked Narayan to distribute them.

Two days later a summons came for Narayan in the evening. Headmaster Dongre ordered some medicines for Vatsalabai's stomachache from the tribal settlement about a mile away.

It was not Narayan's practice to say no when asked to do something. He kept in mind his father's words that a guru was next only to God. He felt dejected.

That evening — it was a Saturday — he met Savji as he left the city limits. Savji stopped him, exclaiming, 'You're going all alone where the tribals live! They'll kill you!' But leaving Savji behind he went ahead, pushing through the darkness.

The darkness had deepened considerably by the time Narayan had returned to the headmaster's house. It was after nine. The 'medicine' given by the Bhil, Desa, was Mahua liquor. A policeman by the railway crossing tried to stop Narayan, who fled for his life.

Headmaster Dongre seemed surprised to see him. 'Didn't anyone

stop you on the way?' He sounded disappointed. Narayan shook his head.

As mealtime at the hostel would by then be over, Narayan agreed without a fuss when asked to stay on and dine.

He was very conscious of the reek of Mahua liquor from the house. Narayan was sitting on the veranda eating his dinner off a leaf plate. The headmaster's voice grew louder. He was rambling. As he ate Narayan remembered the gossip he had heard about the headmaster in the hostel. What was Vatsalabai to him? Why hadn't they married? He had heard all about the headmaster's love of religious rites, his observance of the rules of ritual purity, his habit of drinking on Saturdays — both heard and experienced them.

'Gave me a *jalebi* with your own hand, you mongrel dog!' The headmaster was muttering. 'How did you dare?' Vatsalabai was trying to lead him inside by the hand. 'Desa Bhil spared you. Constable Arjuna also spared you. The cheats!'

Narayan had returned to the hostel.

For a few days Narayan was not to be seen in class. Headmaster Dongre enquired where he was.

'Sir, he has gone to Akola with Raghbadada for Anasuya Chabukswar's engagement,' Ashok Savji and Sampat Karhade informed him.

* * *

The night was heavy with darkness. Cicadas chirped. It was a Saturday, Headmaster Dongre's day of rest. The whole of the past week Narayan had been absent from school. Dongre had written to his sister and brother-in-law at Dadhi that if Narayan had returned to the village, they should keep him there or send him to Nagpur to work.

In the middle of the night Narayan swiftly made his way to the headmaster's house. He was dressed in a dhoti and turban. The whole house was silent. The smell of liquor still lingered. Narayan sprinkled kerosene all around from the bottle that he had. He struck a match and threw it on a pile of wood. There was a burst of flame. Narayan quickly turned away.

Narayan, now dressed in shorts, was going to Akola in the Nagpur-Bhusaval Passenger. From the train he could see that the house on the corner was a roaring mass of flames.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

ANNA BHAU SATHE

Gold from the Grave

Bheema was excited by the news of the death and burial of a prominently wealthy man in the neighbouring village. He was elated and in his imagination he visited the man in the grave several times over. Sitting under a tamarind tree he watched Nabda, his darling daughter, playing by herself. His wife cooked the meal inside and Bheema waited for the sunset and the dark. He glanced eagerly at the sun which was not going down fast enough for him.

Bheema was built like a giant. When going out he usually put on a yellowish dhoti, a red turban and a shirt of coarse cloth. He looked like a wrestler. With his big, bulky head, thick neck, bushy eyebrows and broad face sporting a luxuriant growth of moustache, he had frightened many a ruffian into docility. He feared nothing.

Bheema was from a village on the banks of the river Warna. His great strength was of no help to him in finding a job in his own village. He had strayed over to Bombay in search of work. He had searched for a job all over the city in vain and finally moved to this suburb on the fringe of the jungle. His dream of having a gold necklace made for his wife had come to nothing. He hated the city of Bombay which offers you everything except work and shelter. Settling in the suburb he landed a job as a stone quarry worker.

The jungle had given him both gainful employment and a roof over his head. With his strength of a giant he attacked the rocks, and the hill receded. Granite rocks gaped wide open at the strokes of his hammer. His employer, the quarry contractor, appreciated his work and Bheema was quite happy with his job.

Within six months the quarry closed down and Bheema found himself without work. It was a shock for him to learn that he was jobless when he reported for duty one morning. He was confused. The thought of starvation plunged him into the deepest pit of anxiety.

He stood by the side of a stream in the jungle with his clothes under his arm. He washed himself and started walking towards home. Looking around he found that there were mounds of ashes, obviously

the remains of funeral pyres, and charred bones scattered everywhere. The thought of death did not frighten him. He thought that the dead person must have been jobless, and death must have given him relief. He knew that starvation was staring him in the face. His darling Nabda would go on crying for food, his wife would be sullen and he would have to watch all this helplessly.

Suddenly he noticed something sparkle on the top of the mound of ashes and he bent forward to have a closer look. It was a ring of gold weighing about twelve grams and he quickly picked it up. Squeezing the ring in his palm he felt the keen pleasure of a discovery. Finding gold in the ashes of a funeral pyre opened a way for Bheema to survive and keep the wolf at bay.

The next day found him wandering all over in search of cremation grounds and graveyards. Sifting the ashes he gleaned grains of gold. Seldom did he return home without an earring, a nose ring, an anklet or a necklace. He found that the intense heat of the funeral pyre melts the gold which gets embedded in the bones. He shattered the charred bones into small pieces. Ruthlessly he reduced the skulls and wrist-bones to powder to find a grain of the precious metal. In the evening he went to Kurla, a suburb of Bombay, sold the gold and returned with money in his pocket. On his way home he usually bought a packet of dates for his darling Nabda.

Bheema thus lived by sifting the ashes of dead bodies. He could not understand this paradox of life and death. The distinction between the two was lost on him. He knew that there was gold in the ashes of a rich person, and that the ashes of a poor man did not contain a grain of the metal. His simple logic led him to believe that only the rich should die to help the poor live in this world and that a poor man has no right to die. He solemnly declared to his friends that those leading a life of humiliation have no call to live or die. Day and night he searched cremation grounds and graveyards. Like a ghoul he lived on corpses and so his life was inextricably woven with corpses.

Strange happenings were being reported at the time. Corpses buried in tombs were found to be exhumed. The dead body of the young daughter-in-law of a moneylender was said to have been hauled to the river bank from the burial ground. This caused panic among the people. The police were alerted. It wasn't, however, easy to guard the corpses in the graveyard. An all night vigil over the cemetery was impossible.

The sun set and now it was dark. Bheema ate the food served by

his wife. Divining his intentions she asked him where he was set for. 'Let's give up this business,' she expostulated. 'The whole thing is disgusting. This sifting of ashes, the corpses, the gold, everything is ghastly. People have started talking about us,' she said.

'Shut up,' Bheema shouted at her. Feeling hurt he said in a peevish tone, 'I'll do what I like. Let people say what they will. Who'll feed us if I don't earn?'

'Please don't misunderstand me. This kind of wandering in the cemetery like a fiend is not a fitting occupation for you. I'm frightened to death. The whole thing gives me the creeps.'

'Who's told you that ghosts only haunt graveyards?' retorted Bheema. 'This city of Bombay itself is a colony of ghosts. The real spectres live in houses and the dead ones rot in the graves. Monsters breed in the city, not in the jungles.' Bheema concluded.

This silenced her and Bheema prepared himself for the night's excursion. He growled at his wife that he had not got a job while he roamed all over Bombay, but the funeral ashes had brought him gold. 'When I broke stone the whole day I received only a couple of rupees while a day's work on the funeral ashes fetches me a tenner.' He left home in anger. It was quiet everywhere when Bheema started on his night round.

He had covered his head with a piece of cloth and draped himself with the cowl of a gunnybag. Having girdled his waist Bheema walked on with long strides, holding a pointed iron bar under his arm. All around him it was pitch dark but Bheema was not afraid. The only thought in his mind was that of buying a sari, a petticoat and a blouse and a packet of dates.

The atmosphere was charged with expectancy. The silence was oppressive. A pack of jackals scampered away after a piercing howl. A snake wound its away from the path into the jungle. An owl screeched and the silence grew more frightening. Bheema approached the village and squatting down, peered all over. The village was very quiet. Someone coughed, a lamp winked and everything was still again. Bheema was satisfied. He entered the cemetery and looked for the most recent burial mound. He jumped from one to the other. Scattering the broken earthen pots and bamboo strips he lighted a safety match at each mound and made for the rich man's grave.

Clouds gathered in the sky. The darkness deepened and there was a crack of lightning. Bheema was scared at the prospect of rain, for it might not then be possible for him to find the newly dug grave.

Quickly he moved on and the effort made him perspire. On reaching the end he was frightened and stopped dead. He heard the gnashing of teeth. The sounds of growling and scratching of the earth were also audible. Bheema could not understand it. He lurched forward and all was quiet again. In a short while he heard somebody kicking and Bheema was struck with fear. It was for the first time in his life that he experienced dread, this fear of the supernatural.

But he soon collected himself. When he realized what was happening he felt ashamed. A pack of jackals was there for the dead body buried in the grave. They did not touch the stones laid on the ground. They were trying to reach the corpse by burrowing through the sides. Having scented flesh they were ravenously attacking the grave in which the recently dead man was buried. Though united in their goal they were in furious competition with one another. Putting their noses to the ground they sniffed and vigorously assailed the grave, having been excited by the scent of the flesh.

Bheema was furious. He jumped onto the top of the mound and stationed himself amidst the stones on the rich man's grave. Bheema picked up the large stones and hurled them at the jackals. This sudden attack frightened them and they moved away into hiding.

Bheema, encouraged, decided to get to the corpse before the jackals did.

When the jackals found him busy at work they attacked him. One charged at him, as if in a frenzy, and snapped at his gunnybag cover. Bheema was upset that his cover was torn. Spitting out the pieces of the gunnybag stuck in its fangs, the jackal charged at Bheema with greater vehemence. Now Bheema was ready for it. He finished the animal with one jab of the pointed crowbar. With the fallen animal lying dead by his side, Bheema began digging the grave. But the jackals in the pack attacked him from all sides and a dreadful battle ensued.

Bheema had unearthed half the tomb but had to pause awhile to defend himself against the jackals who were snapping at his flesh. He gave a blow to each one that attacked him. The jackals fell when he hit them but others hurled themselves upon him in greater fury and tore at his muscles.

Bheema, who bore the name of the second son of Kunti, was fighting the jackals for the possession of a carcass, his daily bread. A grim battle was fought in the vicinity of the village, a battle that would never be recorded in the annals of the country's mythology.

All over it was quiet. The city of Bombay was asleep and the village, at rest. The macabre war in the graveyard raged on. The man fought for the gold and the beasts for their food.

Bheema hit the animals with his pointed iron bar and felled them. Those that escaped his jabs tore at his flesh and those that were hit screamed aloud. Bheema howled in pain when he was bitten and swore at them.

After a very long time, the jackals stopped their attack for some moments of rest. Seeing this Bheema began his work of digging open the grave. He loosened the earth and wiped the sweat off his face. He was utterly exhausted. No sooner did he get down into the tomb than the pack of jackals again charged at him. He struck them hard and the defeated pack scampered away. Bheema, the giant, had come out victorious because of his strength and endurance.

Bheema dragged up the corpse with great effort. He lighted a match and took a close look at the corpse. The rigid corpse stood up in the grave in front of him and Bheema groped all over the body. He found a ring on one of the fingers and pocketed it. He tore off the gold rings in the ears and then he remembered that there could be some gold in the mouth of the corpse. He pushed his fingers into the mouth but the jaws were locked tightly and he had to use his crowbar as a wedge to open the mouth. He opened it wide and put his fingers inside. At that very moment the pack of jackals set up a howl and scampered away into the jungle. At the sound the village dogs began to bark loudly, which awakened the people. Bheema could distinctly hear the call given by them to come together and drive away the jackals from the burial ground. This sent down a shiver of fear through his body. He found a ring in the mouth and put it into his pocket. To make a thorough search of the mouth cavity he put two fingers of his left hand into the mouth but found nothing. Inadvertently, he pulled out the iron bar before taking out his fingers.

The jaws shut together with a snap and his fingers were caught in a vice-like grip. A surging wave of excruciating pain passed through Bheema's body.

He saw people coming towards the burial ground, with lanterns in their hands. Fear grasped him and anger against the corpse welled up in him. In sheer rage he hit its skull with his crowbar. The impact of this blow tightened the hold of the jaw bones on his fingers. The teeth cut deeper into his finger bones. He knew that if people found him in the act of defiling the graveyard they would either kill him or hand

him over to the police after a good thrashing. So this is what they call a ghost, he thought, looking at the corpse. In his anger he hit the corpse still harder, cursing the devil to let him go.

By now people had approached the cemetery. Bheema pushed the bar into the mouth of the corpse and pried it open. When there was an opening he pulled out his fingers a bit cautiously. They were cut into pieces and were hanging to the base by shreds of skin. He suffered intense pain. Holding the broken fingers somehow in his fist he bolted towards home.

When he reached home he had high fever. Seeing the state he was in, his wife and child started wailing.

His fingers had to be amputated. The surgeon declared that it was the only way to save him. On the very day that he lost his fingers he learnt that the quarry work would start again. That giant of a man called Bheema wept like a child. Those very fingers with which he smashed stone to smithereens were lost for the sake of gold from the graveyard.

Translated by H.V. Shintre

AVINASH DOLAS

The Refugee

'Go away from here, my son.'

That a mother should say this to her son! It was impossible to believe. No one would have believed it if he had told them. He was haunted by a rising swarm of thoughts. Again and again, he searched within himself for an answer. That the mother who brought him into this world should say to him, 'Go away!' He just couldn't bear it. He staggered like a blind man whose support had suddenly been taken away. Today, on account of his quick temper, he had to sever himself from his relations. Every part of the road looked as lifeless as stone to him. He was trembling, trying to walk steadily. How often he felt like turning and looking back! But his stubborn mind would not let him. His father was not his father any more, nor was his village; and the mother who gave him birth couldn't call him her son any more. His mind burned with the thought. All of them were alien to him. He was an outsider among them — an orphan! Why should he turn back?

His forehead was covered with beads of sweat which appeared like bold pimples all over his body. He felt his nose tingling and his eyes filled with tears. Overflowing his eyes, the tears ran down the slope of his nose to the rim of his lips, and he felt their stinging saltiness. He said to himself, 'One shouldn't call them tears. This is just water, salt water. It is worth nothing, and it knows no other way but to leak out of the eyes like this.'

Overhead, the sun was scorching hot. Hot fumes rose from the earth. The woods around him looked desolate — as desolate as his own life. Like a piece of iron sought by someone for no particular purpose, heated, hammered, pounded flat at will — that's what he was — iron at first inflamed, then enduring blow after blow of the hammer, till finally one day it snapped.

He stopped at a brook and splashed his face over with water, he cupped his hands and drank the salty-tasting water. He dipped his dusty feet into it, chappals and all. He tried to come to grips with the

turmoil in his mind, and turned to look back just once. But the village was out of sight. The trees and the bushes had obliterated it. It was as if nothing had happened. There was no village, and there were no people, no animals. He wiped his face with a handkerchief and started walking again.

His feet were slipping out of his sticky chappals. For a moment he thought that the slimy, slippery chappals might suddenly give way. He smiled to himself. What was his life anyway? Was it not a feat of trying to keep his balance, standing in the mire of slimy customs for twenty-one years? The tenuous folds of casteism would hem in his mind every now and then, but it would still struggle to break out. He slipped on a rock in the path and his wet chappal suddenly snapped. Calling his own ancestors a thousand names he hurled the chappals away. Cursing, he walked on, barefoot. He was surprised to realize that he could use such ugly words of abuse, and spoke to himself, 'My name itself is a curse.'

Now the noise of the traffic had become louder. Still cursing himself, he started walking fast. He had no wish to calculate how far he had come, in how much time. He didn't feel it necessary either. He rubbed his face with the palms of his hands and tried to revive himself from his fatigue. Darkness came over his eyes as he did so. He felt his eyes with his fingers as one would do in the dark. He felt his blood-pressure rising in his chest. His whole body was agitated. A shriek escaped his lips and a sob welled up. In a moment his eyes filled with tears. But instantly, a surge of anger passed like lightning through his head. Quickly, he wiped his eyes, mopped his face with determination and clenched his fists tightly, trying to stop the shivering of his body.

The station was crowded. There was still time for the train to leave. Where should he go? To the north or to the south? East or west? He should go where the road took him. Or his feet. After all, wherever you went, you'd find only human beings, whether in a village or in a city, to the south or the east. Shameless, thieving, servile, wretched dogs who sit chewing the crumbs thrown to them, and getting beaten like mad dogs, if they don't submit. Some bark at the morsels thrown to them — just like me! Some chew the pieces and bark at their own young ones. His heart choked with a rapid rush of emotion. Thinking in this manner, he had called himself a dog. He turned back and walked, taking long strides.

A beggar was noisily biting at the hard, dry pieces of bread in his

dented tin bowl. From time to time the beggar took a piece of bread near one of his eyes, examined it closely, then took it to the other eye, turning it this way and that.

He went ahead, and turned to the left. A woman was chewing a betel-leaf and looking around with shifty eyes. He remembered Chandra, who had asked him to lend her some money. 'Brother Santu, spare me five rupees until Friday. I've to take my son to the doctor. He is very ill.' Her old father was blind. Her husband was caught in the explosion of dynamite in a well and was bed-ridden, his limbs turned to jelly. And yet he had not been able to help her. She sold her body for the sake of five rupees — for her child — to Tulya, the grocer. He was the male, and she the female — it was a payment in terms of body, caste, circumstances. Santu held his hands together tightly, shook his head, and turned away. There was a man dipping all four fingers into the curry he was eating, slurping it noisily. His fingers, thrust into his mouth, were wasted, broken, full of sores, and pus and blood oozed out of them. Santu saw it all and a wave of revulsion passed through his whole body. He turned back the same instant and started walking briskly in the direction of the station.

'Saheb, give something in charity.'

'. . . . . .'

'I am a pilgrim, Saheb.' He turned to have a look. Near the bench where he sat, stood an old man of about sixty, painfully balancing his four-stringed guitar, and his head which tottered.

'Where have you been?'

'To Pandharpur.'

'What for?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' — miserable laughter.

'Saheb?' a questioning expression on the face.

'Why did you go there?'

'To see Mother Vithoba.'

'Or to die?'

'Saheb ...' The beggar muttered and with a strange expression on his face, stumbled and moved away. Man is a big question mark, he thought.

The train thundered into the station. There was a sudden flurry — people rushed here and there. The monotony of it all! He sat still. He didn't know where he was to go. The train gave a whistle. A water carrier served water, pushing his hand-cart along. From a compartment a young woman called, 'O waterman!' The waterman

went there saying 'Yes Memsaheb,' and offered her a glass of water. Instantly a man sitting next to her snatched the glass from her hand and looked at her in contempt. He poured out the water in the glass and gave the empty glass back to the waterman. Then he climbed down from the compartment, beckoned to the woman and got her a glass of water from the restaurant on the platform. Watching this scene Santu was filled with anger. He felt like crashing into the driver's cabin and starting the train, cramming into the compartment first that man, the beggar and all the people of his village and then smashing the train somewhere. At least this hatred between man and man would then come to an end.

The train started and he entered a compartment. Where should he go? and why? He didn't have an answer. He had no one he could call his own. His rebellious blood was rising in his veins. The train had caught speed now. He looked around. Men were standing in a packed crowd in the compartment. There were some sleeping on the benches. One man sat at their feet, his body folded into a bundle. There sat another man staring at the fan overhead in a sad, melancholy manner. He pushed through the crowd a little and stood by the bench, leaning against it. He felt like lying down and shutting his eyes tightly.

'Where are you going, Saab?' Startled, he looked in the direction of the voice. The man standing near him had asked him the question.

'To Bombay.' The words escaped his lips unexpectedly. He must say something more, so he asked, 'And you?'

'I too am going to Bombay.'

He didn't feel there was anything special about it. Every day thousands of people go to Bombay.

'Where do you live?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Where do you live in Bombay?'

'Matunga,' he said for no good reason.

'I'm to going to Santacruz.'

He didn't say anything. The man waited a little and then asked again,

'Do you have any relations in Santacruz?'

'Relations?' he murmured, almost to himself.

'Brother, it's sheer bad luck that we had to come to Hindustan.'

He was startled to hear that, and looked at the old man, who had said it in such a sad, doleful manner.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'What can I say, Saab? We're from Bangla Desh.'
'Bangla Desh?'
'Yes.'
'But there's quite a massacre going on there.'
Instantly the headlines in the newspapers floated before his eyes.
'Of course, there's a massacre; we're also fighting back.'
'Your name?'
'Surji.'
'And what other news from there?'
'We're fighting with all our might.'
'Then what brings you to Bombay today?'
'Saab, we have our relations in Bombay.'

Bangla Desh — massacre — refugees. A whole series of scenes passed before his eyes. A man leaves Bangla Desh to see his relations in Bombay. The government of India gives shelter to thousands and millions of the homeless. And here I am, a citizen of this country! A woman in a village drew water from the well of the high-caste, so they beat her up. They ordered all Mahars to empty the well. A young man like me trying to break out of this casteism couldn't stand all that. I resisted. The whole village was furious. They beat up the Mahars as they do their beasts. They stopped giving them work, they wouldn't allow them water, food — just because they were untouchables. They told me to beg forgiveness, to grovel and prostrate myself before them, confessing my wrong doing. Or else, they threatened to burn the entire Mahar settlement. Just because we are untouchables! I argued, I protested — for my rights. But my own mother — she took my younger brother in her lap, and touched my feet, her own son's feet, and said, 'Don't do this,' and finally told me, 'My son, go away from here!' A mother tells her own son to leave the village — she is reduced to such wretchedness, only on account of caste and custom. And the boy has to leave the village. The whole scene came alive again before his eyes. On one side there was Bangla Desh in turmoil and on the other, the community of the Mahars, in agony. One homeless Bangla Deshi was going back to his relations after twenty years. And one Mahar, even after twenty years, was homeless in his own country.

Translated by Y.S. Kalamkar

Essays & Speeches

Dr Ambedkar's Speech at Mahad

25 December 1927 is a watershed in the history of the Dalit movement. On this day, Dr Ambedkar began an agitation by the Dalits to draw water from the Chavadar Lake at Mahad. The water of this lake was hitherto reserved for caste Hindus. The Manusmriti was burnt here as a mark of Dalit protest against untouchability. The following is the historic speech made by Dr Ambedkar on this occasion.

Gentlemen, you have gathered here today in response to the invitation of the Satyagraha Committee. As the Chairman of that Committee, I gratefully welcome you all.

Many of you will remember that on the 19th of last March all of us came to the Chavadar Lake here. The caste Hindus of Mahad had laid no prohibition on us; but they showed they had objections to our going there by the attack they made. The fight brought results that one might have expected. The aggressive caste Hindus were sentenced to four months' rigorous imprisonment, and are now in jail. If we had not been hindered on 19th March, it would have been proved that the caste Hindus acknowledge our right to draw water from the lake, and we should have had no need to begin our present undertaking.

Unfortunately we were thus hindered, and we have been obliged to call this meeting today. This lake at Mahad is public property. The caste Hindus of Mahad are so reasonable that they not only draw water from the lake themselves but freely permit people of any religion to draw water from it, and accordingly people of other religions such as the Islamic do make use of this permission. Nor do the caste Hindus prevent members of species considered lower than the human, such as birds and beasts, from drinking at the lake. Moreover, they freely permit beasts kept by untouchables to drink at the lake.

Caste Hindus are the very founts of compassion. They practise no *hinsa* and harass no one. They are not of the class of miserly and selfish folk who would grudge even a crow some grains of the food they are eating. The proliferation of *sanyasis* and mendicants is a living testimony to their charitable temperament. They regard altruism as

religious merit and injury to another as a sin.

Even further, they have imbibed the principle that injury done by another must not be repaid but patiently endured, and so, they not only treat the harmless cow with kindness, but spare harmful creatures such as snakes. That one *Atman* or Spiritual Self dwells in all creatures has become a settled principle of their conduct. Such are the caste Hindus who forbid some human beings of their own religion to draw water from the same Chavadar Lake! One cannot help asking the question, why do they forbid us alone?

It is essential that all should understand thoroughly the answer to this question. Unless you do, I feel, you will not grasp completely the importance of today's meeting. The Hindus are divided, according to sacred tradition, into four castes; but according to custom, into five: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and Atishudras. The caste system is the first of the governing rules of the Hindu religion. The second is that the castes are of unequal rank. They are ordered in a descending series of each meaner than the one before.

Not only are their ranks permanently fixed by the rule, but each is assigned boundaries it must not transgress, so that each one may at once be recognized as belonging to its particular rank. There is a general belief that the prohibitions in the Hindu religion against intermarriage, interdining, interdrinking and social intercourse are bounds set to degrees of association with one another. But this is an incomplete idea. These prohibitions are indeed limits to degrees of association; but they have been set to show people of unequal rank what the rank of each is. That is, these bounds are symbols of inequality.

Just as the crown on a man's head shows he is a king, and the bow in his hand shows him to be a Kshatriya, the class to which none of the prohibitions applies is considered the highest of all and the one to which they all apply is reckoned the lowest in rank. The strenuous efforts made to maintain the prohibitions are for the reason that, if they are relaxed, the inequality settled by religion will break down and equality will take its place.

The caste Hindus of Mahad prevent the untouchables from drinking the water of the Chavadar Lake not because they suppose that the touch of the untouchables will pollute the water or that it will evaporate and vanish. Their reason for preventing the untouchables from drinking it is that they do not wish to acknowledge by such a permission that castes declared inferior by sacred tradition are in fact

their equals.

Gentlemen! you will understand from this the significance of the struggle we have begun. Do not let yourselves suppose that the Satyagraha Committee has invited you to Mahad merely to drink the water of the Chavadar Lake of Mahad.

It is not as if drinking the water of the Chavadar Lake will make us immortal. We have survived well enough all these days without drinking it. We are not going to the Chavadar Lake merely to drink its water. We are going to the Lake to assert that we too are human beings like others. It must be clear that this meeting has been called to set up the norm of equality.

I am certain that no one who thinks of this meeting in this light will doubt that it is unprecedented. I feel that no parallel to it can be found in the history of India. If we seek for another meeting in the past to equal this, we shall have to go to the history of France on the continent of Europe. A hundred and thirty-eight years ago, on 24 January 1789, King Louis XVI had convened, by royal command, an assembly of deputies to represent the people of the kingdom. This French National Assembly has been much vilified by historians. The Assembly sent the King and the Queen of France to the guillotine; persecuted and massacred the aristocrats; and drove their survivors into exile. It confiscated the estates of the rich and plunged Europe into war for fifteen years. Such are the accusations levelled against the Assembly by the historians. In my view, the criticism is misplaced; further, the historians of this school have not understood the gist of the achievement of the French National Assembly. That achievement served the welfare not only of France but of the entire European continent. If European nations enjoy peace and prosperity today, it is for one reason: the revolutionary French National Assembly convened in 1789 set new principles for the organization of society before the disorganized and decadent French nation of its time, and the same principles have been accepted and followed by Europe.

To appreciate the importance of the French National Assembly and the greatness of its principles, we must keep in mind the state of French society at the time. You are all aware that our Hindu society is based on the system of castes. A rather similar system of classes existed in the France of 1789: the difference was that it was a society of three castes. Like the Hindu society, the French had a class of Brahmins and another of Kshatriyas. But instead of three different castes of Vaishya, Shudra and Atishudra, there was one class that

comprehended these. This is a minor difference. The important thing is that the caste or class system was similar. The similarity to be noted is not only in the differentiation between classes: the inequality of our caste system was also to be found in the French social system. The nature of the inequality in the French society was different: it was economic in nature. It was, however, equally intense. The thing to bear in mind is there is a great similarity between the French National Assembly that met on 5 May 1789 at Versailles and our meeting today. The similarity is not only in the circumstances in which the two meetings took place but also in their ideals.

That Assembly of the French people was convened to reorganize French society. Our meeting today too has been convened to reorganize Hindu society. Hence, before discussing on what principles our society should be reorganized, we should all pay heed to the principles on which the French Assembly relied and the policy it adopted. The scope of the French Assembly was far wider than that of our present meeting. It had to carry out the threefold organization of the French political, social and religious systems. We must confine ourselves to how social and religious reorganization can be brought about. Since we are not, for the present, concerned with political reorganization, let us see what the French Assembly did in the matter of the religious and social reorganization of their nation. The policy adopted by the French National Assembly in this area can be seen plainly by anyone from three important proclamations issued by that Assembly. The first was issued on 17 June 1789. This was a proclamation about the class systems in France. As said before, French society was divided into three classes. The proclamation abolished the three classes and blended them into one. Further, it abolished the seats reserved separately for the three classes (or estates) in the political assembly. The second proclamation was about the priests. By ancient custom, to appoint or remove these priests was outside the power of the nation, that being the monopoly of a foreign religious potentate, the Pope. Anyone appointed by the Pope was a priest, whether or not he was fit to be one in the eyes of those to whom he was to preach. The proclamation abolished the autonomy of the religious orders and assigned to the French nation the authority to decide who might follow this vocation, who was fit for it and who was not, whether he was to be paid for preaching or not, and so on. The third proclamation was not about the political, economic or religious systems. It was of a general nature and laid down the principles on

which all social arrangements ought to rest. From that point of view, the third proclamation is the most important of the three; it might be called the king of these proclamations. It is renowned the world over as the declaration of human birthrights. It is not only unprecedented in the history of France; more than that, it is unique in the history of civilized nations. For every European nation has followed the French Assembly in giving it a place in its own constitution. So one may say that it brought about a revolution not only in France but the whole world. This proclamation has seventeen clauses, of which the following are important:

1) All human beings are equal by birth; and they shall remain equal till death. They may be distinguished in status only in the public interest. Otherwise, their equal status must be maintained.

2) The ultimate object of politics is to maintain these human birthrights.

3) The entire nation is the mother-source of sovereignty. The rights of any individual, group or special class, unless they are given by the nation, cannot be acknowledged as valid on any other ground, be it political or religious.

4) Any person is free to act according to his birthright. Any limit placed upon this freedom must be only to the extent necessary to permit other persons to enjoy their birthrights. Such limits must be laid down by law: they cannot be set on the grounds of the religion or on any other basis than the law of the land.

5) The law will forbid only such actions as are injurious to society. All must be free to do what has not been forbidden by law. Nor can anyone be compelled to do what the law has not laid down as a duty.

6) The law is not in the nature of bounds set by any particular class. The right to decide what the law shall be rests with the people or their representatives. Whether such a law is protective or punitive, it must be the same for all. Since justice requires that all social arrangements be based on the equality of all, all individuals are equally eligible for any kind of honour, power and profession. Any distinction in such matters must be owing to differences of individual merit; it must not be based on birth.

I feel our meeting today should keep the image of this French National Assembly before the mind. The road it marked out for the development of the French nation, the road that all progressed nations have followed, ought to be the road adopted for the development of Hindu society by this meeting. We need to pull away the nails which

hold the framework of caste-bound Hindu society together, such as those of the prohibition of intermarriage down to the prohibition of social intercourse so that Hindu society becomes all of one caste. Otherwise untouchability cannot be removed nor can equality be established.

Some of you may feel that since we are untouchables, it is enough if we are set free from the prohibitions of interdrinking and social intercourse. That we need not concern ourselves with the caste system; how does it matter if it remains? In my opinion this is a total error. If we leave the caste system alone and adopt only the removal of untouchability as our policy, people will say that we have chosen a low aim. To raise men, aspiration is needed as much as outward efforts. Indeed it is to be doubted whether efforts are possible without aspiration. Hence, if a great effort is to be made, a great aspiration must be nursed. In adopting an aspiration one need not be abashed or deterred by doubts about one's power to satisfy it. One should be ashamed only of mean aspirations; not of failure that may result because one's aspiration is high. If untouchability alone is removed, we may change from Atishudras to Shurdas; but can we say that this radically removes untouchability? If such puny reforms as the removal of restrictions on social intercourse etc., were enough for the eradication of untouchability, I would not have suggested that the caste system itself must go. Gentlemen! you all know that if a snake is to be killed it is not enough to strike at its tail — its head must be crushed. If any harm is to be removed, one must seek out its root and strike at it. An attack must be based on the knowledge of the enemy's vital weakness. Duryodhana was killed because Bheema struck at his thigh with his mace. If the mace had hit Duryodhana's head he would not have died; for his thigh was his vulnerable spot. One finds many instances of a physician's efforts to remove a malady proving fruitless because he has not perceived fully what will get rid of the disease; similar instances of failure to root out a social disease because it is not fully diagnosed are rarely recorded in history; and so one does not often become aware of them. But let me acquaint you with one such instance that I have come across in my reading. In the ancient European nation of Rome, the patricians were considered upper class, and the plebians, lower class. All power was in the hands of the patricians, and they used it to ill-treat the plebians. To free themselves from this harassment, the plebians, on the strength of their unity, insisted that laws should be written down for the facilitation of justice

and for the information of all. Their patrician opponents agreed to this; and a charter of twelve laws was written down. But this did not rid the oppressed plebians of their woes. For the officers who enforced the laws were all of the patrician class; moreover the chief officer, called the tribune, was also a patrician. Hence, though the laws were uniform, there was partiality in their enforcement. The plebians then demanded that instead of the administration being in the hands of one tribune there should be two tribunes, of whom one should be elected by the plebians and the other by the patricians. The patricians yielded to this too, and the plebians rejoiced, supposing they would now be free of their miseries. But their rejoicing was short-lived. The Roman people had a tradition that nothing was to be done without the favourable verdict of the oracle at Delphi. Accordingly, even the election of a duly elected tribune — if the oracle did not approve of him — had to be treated as annulled, and another had to be elected, of whom the oracle approved. The priest who put the question to the oracle was required, by sacred religious custom, to be one born of parents married in the mode the Romans called *conferatio*; and this mode of marriage prevailed only among the patricians; so that the priest of Delphi was always a patrician.

The wily priest always saw to it that if the plebians elected a man really devoted to their cause, the oracle went against him. Only if the man elected by the plebians to the position of tribune was amenable to the patricians, would the oracle favour him and give him the opportunity of actually assuming office. What did the plebians gain by their right to elect a tribune? The answer must be, nothing in reality. Their efforts proved meaningless because they did not trace the malady to its source. If they had, they would, at the same time that they demanded a tribune of their election, have also settled the question of who should be the priest at Delphi. The disease could not be eradicated by demanding a tribune; it needed control of the priestly office; which the plebians failed to perceive. We too, while we seek a way to remove untouchability, must inquire closely into what will eradicate the disease; otherwise we too may miss our aim. Do not be foolish enough to believe that removal of the restrictions on social intercourse or interdrinking will remove untouchability.

Remember that if the prohibitions on social intercourse and interdrinking go, the roots of untouchability are not removed. Release from these two restrictions will, at the most, remove untouchability as it appears outside the home; but it will leave untouchability in the

home untouched. If we want to remove untouchability in the home as well as outside, we must break down the prohibition against intermarriage. Nothing else will serve. From another point of view, we see that breaking down the bar against intermarriage is the way to establish real equality. Anyone must confess that when the root division is dissolved, incidental points of separateness will disappear by themselves. The interdictions on interdining, interdrinking and social intercourse have all sprung from the one interdiction against intermarriage. Remove the last and no special efforts are needed to remove the rest. They will disappear of their own accord. In my view the removal of untouchability consists in breaking down the ban on intermarriage and doing so will establish real equality. If we wish to root out untouchability, we must recognize that the root of untouchability is in the ban on intermarriage. Even if our attack today is on the ban against interdrinking, we must press it home against the ban on intermarriage; otherwise untouchability cannot be removed by the roots. Who can accomplish this task? It is no secret that the Brahmin class cannot do it.

While the caste system lasts, the Brahmin caste has its supremacy. No one, of his own will, surrenders power which is in his hands. The Brahmins have exercised their sovereignty over all other castes for centuries. It is not likely that they will be willing to give it up and treat the rest as equals. The Brahmins do not have the patriotism of the Samurais of Japan. It is useless to hope that they will sacrifice their privileges as the Samurai class did, for the sake of national unity based on a new equality. Nor does it appear likely that the task will be carried out by other caste Hindus. These others, such as the class comprising the Marathas and other similar castes, are a class between the privileged and those without any rights.

A privileged class, at the cost of a little self-sacrifice, can show some generosity. A class without any privileges has ideals and aspirations; for, at least as a matter of self-interest, it wishes to bring about a social reform. As a result it develops an attachment to principles rather than to self-interest. The class of caste Hindus other than Brahmins lies in between: it cannot practise the generosity possible to the class above and it does not develop the attachment to principles that develops in the class below. This is why this class is seen to be concerned not so much about attaining equality with the Brahmins as about maintaining its status above the untouchables.

For the purposes of the social reform required, the class of caste

Hindus other than Brahmins is feeble. If we are to await its help, we should fall into the difficulties that the farmer faced, who depended on his neighbour's help for his harvesting, as in the story of the mother lark and her chicks found in many textbooks.

The task of removing untouchability and establishing equality that we have undertaken, we must carry out ourselves. Others will not do it. Our life will gain its true meaning if we consider that we are born to carry out this task and set to work in earnest. Let us receive this merit which is awaiting us.

This is a struggle in order to raise ourselves; hence we are bound to undertake it, so as to remove the obstacles to our progress. We all know how at every turn, untouchability muddies and soils our whole existence. We know that at one time our people were recruited in large numbers into the troops. It was a kind of occupation socially assigned to us and few of us needed to be anxious about earning our bread. Other classes of our level have found their way into the troops, the police, the courts and the offices, to earn their bread. But in the same areas of employment you will no longer find the untouchables.

It is not that the law debars us from these jobs. Everything is permissible as far the law is concerned. But the Government finds itself powerless because other Hindus consider us untouchables and look down upon us, and it acquiesces in our being kept out of Government jobs. Nor can we take up any decent trade. It is true, partly, that we lack money to start business, but the real difficulty is that people regard us as untouchables and no one will accept goods from our hands.

To sum up, untouchability is not a simple matter; it is the mother of all our poverty and lowliness and it has brought us to the abject state we are in today. If we want to raise ourselves out of it, we must undertake this task. We cannot be saved in any other way. It is a task not for our benefit alone; it is also for the benefit of the nation.

Hindu society must sink unless the untouchability that has become a part of the four-castes system is eradicated. Among the resources that any society needs in the struggle for life, a great resource is the moral order of that society. And everyone must admit that a society in which the existing moral order upholds things that disrupt the society and condemns those that would unite the members of the society, must find itself defeated in any struggle for life with other societies. A society which has the opposite moral order, one in which things that unite are considered laudable and things that divide are

condemned, is sure to succeed in any such struggle.

This principle must be applied to Hindu society. Is it any wonder that it meets defeat at every turn when it upholds a social order that fragments its members, though it is plain to anyone who sees it that the four-castes system is such a divisive force and that a single caste for all, would unite society? If we wish to escape these disastrous conditions, we must break down the framework of the four-castes system and replace it by a single caste system.

Even this will not be enough. The inequality inherent in the four-castes system must be rooted out. Many people mock at the principles of equality. Naturally, no man is another's equal. One has an impressive physique; another is slow-witted. The mockers think that, in view of these inequalities that men are born with, the egalitarians are absurd in telling us to regard them as equals. One is forced to say that these mockers have not understood fully the principle of equality.

If the principle of equality means that privilege should depend, not on birth, wealth, or anything else, but solely on the merits of each man, then how can it be demanded that a man without merit, and who is dirty and vicious, should be treated on a level with a man who has merit and is clean and virtuous? Such is a counter-question sometimes posed. It is essential to define equality as giving equal privileges to men of equal merit.

But before people have had an opportunity to develop their inherent qualities and to merit privileges, it is just to treat them all equally. In sociology, the social order is itself the most important factor in the full development of qualities that any person may possess at birth. If slaves are constantly treated unequally, they will develop no qualities other than those appropriate to slaves, and they will never become fit for any higher status. If the clean man always repulses the unclean man and refuses to have anything to do with him, the unclean man will never develop the aspiration to become clean. If the criminal or immoral castes are given no refuge by the virtuous castes, the criminal castes will never learn virtue.

The examples given above show that, although an equal treatment may not create good qualities in one who does not have them at all, even such qualities where they exist need equal treatment for their development; also, developed good qualities are wasted and frustrated without equal treatment.

On the one hand, the inequality in Hindu society stunts the

progress of individuals and in consequence stunts society. On the other hand, the same inequality prevents society from bringing into use powers stored in individuals. In both ways, this inequality is weakening Hindu society, which is in disarray because of the four-castes system.

Hence, if Hindu society is to be strengthened, we must uproot the four-castes system and untouchability, and set the society on the foundations of the two principles of one caste only and of equality. The way to abolish untouchability is not any other than the way to invigorate Hindu society. Therefore I say that our work is beyond doubt as much for the benefit of the nation as it is in our own interest.

Our work has been begun to bring about a real social revolution. Let no one deceive himself by supposing that it is a diversion to quieten minds entranced with sweet words. The work is sustained by strong feeling, which is the power that drives the movement. No one can now arrest it. I pray to God that the social revolution which begins here today may fulfil itself by peaceful means.

None can doubt that the responsibility of letting the revolution take place peacefully rests more heavily on our opponents than on us. Whether this social revolution will work peacefully or violently will depend wholly on the conduct of the caste Hindus. People who blame the French National Assembly of 1789 for atrocities forget one thing. That is, if the rulers of France had not been treacherous to the Assembly, if the upper classes had not resisted it, had not committed the crime of trying to suppress it with foreign help, it would have had no need to use violence in the work of the revolution and the whole social transformation would have been accomplished peacefully.

We say to our opponents too: please do not oppose us. Put away the orthodox scriptures. Follow justice. And we assure you that we shall carry out our programme peacefully.

Transcribed by Changdeo Khairmode
Translated by Rameshchandra Sirkar

ARJUN DANGLE

Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future

The present article is an objective attempt to review the Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra.

The Caste System in India

A unique feature of Indian society is its composition on the basis of caste. A number of Indian and foreign sociologists have put forward theories on the class and caste systems. While space does not permit me to discuss all these theories even briefly, it will be appropriate to present the views of Dr B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), the father of the Indian Constitution. A Dalit himself, he led a fierce struggle for his caste-fellows' rights.

According to the ancient *dharmashastras* (religious texts) of the Hindus, there were only four *varnas* (classes). The Brahmins were priests; the Kshatriyas, warriors; the Vaishyas, traders and the Shudras, skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled labourers doing menial work. This hierarchy is primarily a class system and the development of a society based on class is a world-wide phenomenon.

Dr Ambedkar has traced the development of the caste system in his works *Castes in India — Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development (1916), Annihilation of Caste (1936)* and *Who were the Shudras?* (1948). In his opinion, Hindu society in the early stages was divided on the basis of class, as had happened the world over.

Later, according to Dr Ambedkar, each of these classes became an enclosed unit, accessible only by birth; in other words, a caste. This development was unique to India. The first to enclose themselves were the priests or Brahmins; soon this exclusivity spread to the other classes too. Dr Ambedkar describes the process as the infection of imitation. He rejects the commonly held view that castes were created by God, or that the caste system evolved as the result of a special evolution of Indian society.

Many researchers have been tempted to credit the origin of the caste system to the sage Manu because *Manusmriti*, a religious text attributed to the sage, justifies the caste system. Commenting on this view, Dr Ambedkar states that castes existed even before Manu who was merely an ardent supporter who canonized the institution, and not the originator, of the system.

Dr Ambedkar realized that to understand the development of the caste system it is necessary to view it as a part of the conditions prevailing at the time and not associate it with religion. He writes: 'Preaching did not make the caste system nor will it unmake it.'

While the four castes — Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras — came to be developed following particular conditions, the caste system and later the class system were given religious sanction in the Hindu texts which were written by the Brahmins. The texts emphasized that the class system was God-made and not man-made. The Brahmins spread the theory that they themselves were born from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet. Hence the Brahmins were the most superior, next came the Kshtriyas, and so on. Theories such as this were put forth in the Rigveda which was again claimed to be God-made.

The social, political, economic and religious restrictions laid down by the Brahmins in their religious texts were implemented by the kings or the Kshatriyas. Thus, to follow the duties allotted to a particular caste in the texts became not only a religious obligation but also obedience to a royal order. In other words, religion and the State joined hands and bound the lowest class namely the Shudras into mental, cultural and social slavery and later into untouchability.

The living conditions of these untouchables were shameful. They had no land to till nor could they follow any profession. They did menial work ordered by the higher castes, come rain or shine. Treated like animals, they lived apart from the village, and had to accept leftovers from the higher caste people, in return for their endless toil. Their physical contact was said to 'pollute' the upper castes — even their shadow was said to have the same effect. Hindu religious texts forbade them to wear good clothes or ornaments or even footwear, and prescribed severe and humiliating punishment for violating these orders. Even for a basic necessity like water they were helplessly dependent on the higher castes' good will. The most perverted practice of untouchability was that which at one time compelled the

untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their necks so that their sputum should not fall to the earth and pollute it. Another was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes on them.

The caste system in India was based on exploitation. An exploiting system always adheres to the philosophy or system which is most favourable to it, while other systems are either destroyed or corrupted. Social inequality and untouchability were convenient, indeed necessary for the earlier rulers, and were hence retained. Religious sanction was perpetuated and the cultural development and philosophy that supported the exploitation were encouraged to flourish. All revolts against untouchability or social inequality failed.

Thus the untouchables lived a life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice, atrocities — practices totally against humanity. The only thing available to them in plenty was their wretchedness and this was so mingled with every drop of their blood that they forgot their own existence and could hardly dream of freedom or independence. This condition prevailed till the British came to India.

Arrival of the British

The arrival of the British and their establishment as rulers in India severely jolted the social system in India. The British brought with them new knowledge, technology and production processes which in turn led to industrialization. Most importantly, a new, codified legal system replaced the old one dominated by religious restrictions. With the introduction of English and its spread, a new class of literates began to grow.

Human relations began to be examined in the light of ethical values and by the touchstone of scientific enquiry. The work of social reconstruction gained momentum.

A generation of social reformers came into being during the early days of the British rule. However, their reforms were restricted to evils such as child marriage and superstition, that too among the higher classes of society, that is the Brahmins. While the restricted scope of their reforms was excusable in the early days of social awakening and social reconstruction, it cannot be denied that these reformers were intimidated by religion-based values and by those who

jealously guarded these values.

But even in such times there was born a man — Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1828-1890) — who was not intimidated but ruthlessly examined Hindu religion, fiercely attacked those who supported caste superiority and strongly maintained that the backward classes, untouchables and women in the country must be freed from slavery and be allowed to live a life of dignity.

The credit for taking the brilliant, aggressive ideology of Mahatma Phule one step further and rendering it even more brilliant goes to Dr Bheemrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956).

Dr Ambedkar, Father of Dalit Literature

It is significant that Dalit literature owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic change. This explains the various aspects of serious thought in Dalit literature. This literature is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who as untouchables are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. Their literature is thus characterized by a feeling of rebellion against the establishment, of negativism and scientificity. Studying Dalit literature or the role of this literature from only a literary or an academic point of view fails to present a complete perspective in assessing it. Dalit literature must be assessed in the sociological framework. This overall perspective has been conspicuously absent in the review of Dalit literature so far.

A number of researchers have attempted to trace the origins of the Dalit literary movement. Some trace it back to the Buddhist period. For some the originator is the saint-poet Chokhamela (14th C AD). Some give the credit to Mahatma Phule (1828-90) and some to Prof. S.M. Mate (1886-1957). The researchers maintain that though the term 'Dalit literature' did not exist during this period, concern for Dalits and about the injustice meted to them is first reflected in the writings of these authors and so they can be called pioneers of the Dalit literary movement.

These statements stretch logic too far. While both Gautam Buddha and Mahatma Phule revolted against the unjust class structure and while it is true their teachings and ideas are inspiring even today, a historical and objective examination of the situation reveals that it was Dr Ambedkar who was the enabling factor in Dalit literature because

of his ideas, outlook towards life and his struggle to achieve what he felt just.

The history of Marathi literature indicates that the credit for any new literary stream is given to an author of imaginative literature. In that sense Dr Ambedkar has not done any creative writing. His writing in Marathi is limited to serious articles in some of his own Marathi periodicals like *Mukanayak*, *Bahishkrut*, *Janata* and *Prabudha Bharat*, though his major serious writing is in English.

However, through his struggle against untouchability and socio-economic inequality, he liberated the Dalits in India from mental slavery and abject wretchedness, thus giving them a new self-respect. It is not possible here to trace the entire history of his struggle against social injustice, but the extent of his authority can be well estimated from the fact that his foes included both the British rulers and the Indian National Congress influenced by Mahatma Gandhi.

The Dalit literary movement has today reached various parts of India and the literature is now growing in almost all Indian languages. Yet it is no coincidence that its beginning took place in the Marathi language in Maharashtra. Dr Ambedkar was from Maharashtra and the Dalit multitudes there supported him fearlessly and loyally. Dr Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits, who can today hold their heads high thanks to him. The literary manifestation of this social awareness is Dalit literature.

The Development of Dalit Literature

A question that often arises is: if Dalit literature originated with Dr Ambedkar why did the Dalit literary movement flourish only after Dr Ambedkar's death? This is due to a number of reasons.

Before Dr Ambedkar, the untouchables led a life of poverty, ignorance and misery. Dr Ambedkar's call awakened the man in the Dalit and this common Dalit man joined the movement with all his strength. How could those who had just been awakened, who had never known life as normal human beings, who had no cultural or literary legacy, have any literary consciousness? In fact, even expecting it of them is unreasonable.

However, during this period, Dalit artists did participate in the movement by composing songs and writing ballads, and through

traditional folk arts such as *tamasha* and *jalsa*. The literary expression of Dr Ambedkar's philosophy and movement during his lifetime was more or less of this kind. However, it did not last long, as it was topical in nature and had a basis of propaganda.

Just as literature originated as a part of Dr Ambedkar's movement, even before this movement, around 1920, there were attempts by writers to represent the miserable conditions of the Dalits to the British government. These writers attacked the *Manusmriti* and the cruel practices of Hinduism. Among them were Gopalbaba Valangkar, Pandit Kondiram and Kisan Phagoji Bansod. Gopalbaba Valangkar, who wrote in English, was in the Indian army and tried to organize public opinion when the British stopped the military recruitment of untouchable youths. Though Kisan Phagoji Bansod opposed Dr Ambedkar when the latter announced his conversion to Buddhism at Yewle in north Maharashtra in 1935, his own poetry fiercely attacked Hinduism. Dalit literature, thus, was being written in a very small way before Dr Ambedkar's movement.

Dr Ambedkar was a far-sighted, constructive politician and sociologist. He founded the People's Education Society in Bombay in 1945 and started the Siddharth College in Bombay as he believed that education opens out new avenues and that Dalits should have access to them. His message, 'Unite, Educate and Agitate', was being followed by more and more people. A number of movements were being launched on political and social fronts.

Around 1950, when the first batch of Dalit youths graduated from college, Ghanashyam Talwatkar and others set up a literary body, the Siddharth Sahitya Sangh. The Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh was later formed from this body. In spite of the Dalit name, the literature of these people continued to show the influence of white-collar values. The major questions faced by them were: our life and problems are different from those of others. Can these be formulated into literature? Will such literature be accepted?

The literature of this period appeared chiefly in *Prabuddha Bharat*, the mouthpiece of the Republican Party of India (formerly the Scheduled Castes Federation) and in the Dalit magazines brought out at the time of Dr Ambedkar's birth anniversary. The Marathi literary scene during this period was dominated by Brahminical writers like V.S. Khandekar and N.S. Phadke, and Dalit literature was not exempt from their influence. Dalit literature did present problems or stories concerning Dalits, but this literature was still set in the mould

of Khandekar and Phadke.

In other words, some Dalits had 'Brahminized' themselves and attempted to speak, read and write like Brahmins. They wanted to forget the past. They did not have the courage to face reality. The Dalit literature of this period fell victim to the so-called cultural values of the time.

It would not be fair to hold these Dalit writers responsible for their slavish mentality, which was the natural reaction of a deprived life. A salient feature of this period was the honest desire of some writers to have a separate Dalit literature. They tried to shape this literature as much as they could.

This period also saw the rise of Anna Bhau Sathe (? – 1969). Influenced by Marxism and the writings of Maxim Gorky, he portrayed effectively the life of the Dalits and gave voice to their hopes and aspirations. Anna Bhau Sathe stands out prominently among progressive Marxist artists and writers who followed Marxism by the book. An outlook towards literature and life influenced by Marxism, his sense of belonging as a Dalit to Dr Ambedkar's movement, his deep understanding of society and literature and his firsthand experience of Dalit life enriched his writing.

Indifference of Progressive Writers

One finds there have been some major socially oriented streams in Marathi literature. Gandhian literature influenced by the life and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and the progressive literature influenced by Marxism are two such examples. The Dalits however did not feel an affinity for the Marxist literature of dissent, though the latter was influenced by a philosophy which spoke for the exploited and the poor, and reflected the feelings of the lowest stratum of society. The Dalits did not consider this literature a part of their literary tradition.

Though Dr Ambedkar led an agitation with Comrade Dange against the 'Black Act' in 1938, this alliance gave a fillip to the labour movement but did not form an atmosphere for the origination of a social revolution. The upper caste leadership, inspired by the Russian Revolution, did not feel the need to revolt against casteism and eradicate the internal contradictions among the exploited classes. The progressive writers did not try to permeate to the lowest stratum.

There are many — political, social and cultural — reasons for this attitude of the Dalits. Why did the progressive literature of this period not portray the major events in Dr Ambedkar's life such as the Satyagraha at Mahad in 1927, or at Nashik in 1930? Or try to analyse why Dr Ambedkar who founded the Independent Labour Party in 1936 and chalked out a class-based programme, later dissolved it and set up the Scheduled Castes Federation whose basis was caste?

An author or an artist of this period could not detach himself from the influence of his traditional upbringing, whatever philosophy he professed to follow. This is true even today. The fault does not lie with his philosophy. The fault, if any, lies with his psychological and social weakness. These traditional influences are reflected not only in the lives of the writers but also in their works. To sum up, the progressive literature of this period was restricted only to the capitalist-labour conflict and this conflict was often portrayed unrealistically, being greatly influenced by romanticism. The movement of progressive literature received a setback and was revived only as late as 1960.

The First Dalit Literary Conference

The conversion of Dr Ambedkar along with innumerable followers from caste dominated Hinduism to Buddhism on 14 October 1956 was an event not only of religious significance but also of social and cultural importance. The Dalits now found a way to a new cultural life. Arising out of this was the need to have a separate conference of Dalit writers. The need for such a conference had been noted by Mahatma Phule about a hundred years ago when in his letter to the Marathi Granthakar Sabha (the annual assembly now called the Sahitya Sammelan) he remarked about non-Dalit writers: 'The feelings expressed in our meetings and books do not appear in books written by them or in their meetings. How will people with their heads in the clouds understand what adversities and troubles we have faced?' (*Mahatma Phule: Samagra Vangmaya* p. 300). The conference was actually scheduled for December 1956 under the presidentship of Dr Ambedkar but his untimely death on 6 December 1956 put off the conference. (*Prabhudha Bharat*, 18-1-58).

The first conference of Dalit writers was in the event organized in Bombay in 1958 by the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha.

'Bandhumadav' in his article in the *Prabuddha Bharat* of

15 February 1958 explains the necessity for such a conference and its aim. 'Just as the Russian writers helped the revolution by spreading Lenin's revolutionary ideas through their works, our writers should spread Dr Ambedkar's philosophy to the villages... Politics is just one way of attacking opposition. Unless we attack from all sides we cannot defeat those who have inflicted injustice on us for the last thousands of years.'

Many feel that the term 'Dalit literature' came to be used after a stormy discussion organized by the periodical *Marathwada* in its Diwali issue of 1969. It cannot be debated that the use of this term during the discussion added to the respectability of the term. But in fact, the 1958 conference discussed Dalit literature in detail and passed the following resolution: 'Resolution No. 5 — that the literature written by the Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits in Marathi be accepted as a separate entity known as "Dalit literature" and realizing its cultural importance, the universities and literary organizations should give it its proper place.' *(Prabuddha Bharat*, 4-3-58).

The first conference of the Dalit writers went almost unnoticed. No daily or weekly or magazine except Acharya Atre's *Maratha* took any notice of it. The indifference of the established class towards the Dalits, their problems and their literature is reflected in this attitude.

The inaugural speech by Anna Bhau Sathe spelt out the purpose of Dalit literature but it failed to set into motion any literary activity. In fact, barring a few exceptions, there were no Dalit writers of calibre at that time.

Conditions After Dr Ambedkar's Death

There were several reasons why the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh did not become a platform for Dalit literature or Dalit writers. An important reason was the split in the Republican Party after the death of Dr Ambedkar. Hoping to build a strong opposition party to sustain democracy in the country, Dr Ambedkar wanted to bring together all those who believed in economic and social equality. He corresponded with prominent politicians of the time — Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, S.M. Joshi and Acharya Atre. He proposed to dissolve his caste-based party, the Scheduled Castes Federation, and set up a wider Republican Party. But he passed away before anything could take

shape.

Two years after Dr Ambedkar's death, his so-called political heirs set up the Republican Party of India. But personal rivalry afflicted the party. It joined the Samyukata Maharashtra Samiti which was formed for the struggle for a separate Maharashtra state. Some leaders with middle-class attitudes felt that the R.P. should not have ties with Communists.

As those associated with Dalit literature were part of the R.P., the result of the differences and factionalism were reflected in Dalit literature and the Dalit movement, and this stormy conflict continues even today.

Dr Ambedkar's life and philosophy are a source of inspiration to all Dalit writers. But there is one group of creative artists, thinkers and writers who feel that Ambedkarism and Marxism support each other. In other words, they want to fight on both class and caste levels. Another group considers Ambedkarism complete and does not want any other 'ism' to be grafted on to it. A third stream of thought is of those who want to have Buddhist literature rather than Dalit literature. This last was a weak stream of thought and did not develop systematically.

Baburao Bagul : The Writer who Gave Momentum to.Dalit Literature

The sixties were an important decade for Marathi literature. A number of new streams appeared during this period. Narayan Surve's poetry which portrayed the problems of the workers came into being during this period. This period is also characterized by the Little Magazine movement and the emergence of the Angry Young Man in Marathi literature. Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat had been writing about the Dalits. But in the sixties were published some stories which gave great momentum to Dalit literature. These were by Baburao Bagul. His stories rebelled against the social system and gave it a jolt. His collection of short stories *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had Concealed my Caste) took the entire Marathi literary world by storm. It was hailed by Marathi periodicals and reviewers. Some thought it resembled the jazz music of the Blacks, for some others it was the epic of the Dalits. Some regarded the ten stories in the collection as ten electric shocks. The collection of stories had not only the power to disturb but also raised several new questions in Marathi literature.

Before this, many had felt that their experiences, their life, their revolutionary views should be put into words and that these could be subjects of poetry or prose. But they were also confused by the question of how this should be done. The collection of short stories by Bagul helped to give them the strength to bear their scorching experiences and shape these experiences creatively. In this way Baburao helped to shape Dalit literature and by showing how to combine creativity with thought he inspired many writers to render more effective the feelings of suffering expressed by Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat.

The Little Magazine Movement

Besides Narayan Surve's poetry which was highly influenced by Marxism and which revived progressive literature and the literature by Dalit writers, a third stream of thought in the sixties was the movement by the Angry Young Men to publish Little Magazines. All the three streams were generally a revolt against the establishment and as such were sympathetic to one another. A number of Dalit writers wrote in the Little Magazines. In fact Baburao Bagul's rebellious poems were published in the Little Magazine *Fakta*.

Many people say that this movement was a literary fraud or humbug. But this was the view of the ivory-tower critics, and the movement was not as they portrayed it. Of course, some facetious acts took place in this movement, such as burning the literary magazine *Satyakatha* or holding poets' gatherings in running buses or in public urinals. While such things may be necessary in a movement, there has to be a discipline and a conceptual framework for such 'novel' acts. Such a discipline was lacking and thus these acts appeared to be only an empty display.

The Little Magazine movement could not take root. When we try to trace the reasons for this, we can also understand why the Dalit literary movement grew rapidly.

The publication of Little Magazines was a movement, and a movement implies action by a team. The first step is to identify the enemy of the movement. The proponents of the Little Magazine movement claimed they were fighting against the establishment. But as they wrongly identified a magazine like *Satyakatha* or a popular writer with the establishment, the movement became personalized

and person-oriented . The enemies of a movement are not individuals but systems and while fighting against a system, one has to think of an alternative one. Here, the struggle was mainly against an established technique of writing. The stand of the movement's members was: 'We shall write the way we feel; who are you to dictate to us?' Except that they used some words to denote the sexual organs and wrote to convey the depressed feeling: 'Ours is a ball-less generation', it is difficult to distinguish the literature of those Angry Young Men from that of the established writers.

If these men had any sociological imagination, they would not have called themselves 'ball-less'. They would have discussed the stagnation in Marathi literature and critically analysed the values and ideas resulting from the social system here. They would have expressed this literature in terms of new literary values. We see here how creativity is destroyed for lack of social orientation. Besides, running a Little Magazine is also an economically affordable activity. What happened in this case was that anybody at all with the help of some friends and a little money published a 'non-periodical'. Hence the initial awe or seriousness of this movement petered out. While fighting against the establishment some angry young men became part of it.

Though the movement did not become successful, it did have some literary advantages. Writers expressed themselves boldly. The equation that the elitist critics have the last word was challenged. Landmarks like *Kosala* by Bhalchandra Nemade appeared. Leading writers and poets like Satish Kalsekar, Tulsi Parab and Raja Dhale related their literature to the Dalit and toiling masses.

Whether in the field of literature or in the cultural or economic fields, rebellion separated from social relevance becomes meaningless and has no effect on an unjust system. People who believe in the autonomy of literature may find this difficult to accept, but I feel that the autonomy of a work of art does not mean separating it from life or society.

Progressive Literature

A review of the movement of progressive literature of this period shows that a large number of books were published. However, none of these had the power of Narayan Surve's poetry as seen in his two

anthologies: *Aisa Ga Mi Bramha* or *Majhe Vidyapeeth*. Poems in these anthologies have given a new direction to Marathi poetry and it is a matter of great regret that there was no writing or writer of this calibre in the movement during this period. My statement refers not to critical literature or the literature of ideas but to creative literary works. The reasons why the progressive movement did not get momentum are more or less the same as those explaining the conditions in the early phases of the movement.

The movement of progressive literature which grew under the influence of Marxism was not continuous but it forced Marathi critical thought to come out of the mysterious aura surrounding it. *Sahitya ani Samaj Jeevan*, a critical work by Lalji Pendse published in 1937, was certainly revolutionary in approach. The earlier approach that viewed ancient literature as divine changed and such literature was more objectively assessed. This brought a new meaning to examining a work of literature. Reviewing literature with the help of historical materialism could now explain why a particular type of literature was created during a particular period. Literature began to be related to the then existing social conditions, and began to be viewed from the sociological point of view. The critical theory of the progressive literary movement not only augmented the strength of criticism of social realism but also gave it a kind of respectability. Marxist critics like S.A. Dange, B.R. Sunthankar, G.B. Sardar, Sharatchandra Muktibodh and D.K. Bedekar or those critics who were influenced by this new form of criticism — V.S. Khandekar, G.T. Madkholkar, Kusumavati Deshpande — have together given us a different way of looking at Marathi literature.

The Centre of the Dalit Literary Movement

After reviewing the streams contemporary to the movement of Dalit literature, let us return to the movement. As a result of the setting up of Milind College by Dr Ambedkar in Aurangabad, Marathwada emerged as the centre of the movement. A majority of students in this college were from the rural areas and most of the staff members were Dalits. The non-Dalit staff members too were associated with the Dalit movement. Ideas about literary and cultural revolution were exchanged. The Dalits contributed to the college annual and the guidance came from Principal M.B. Chitnis. Principal M.N. Wankhade who had been to the U.S. for

his higher studies also returned about the same time to Aurangabad and brought with him the mordancy of Black literature, its feeling of revolt, the shocking experiences reflected in it, the forms in which it manifested itself. He made a comparative study of the Dalits and the Blacks.

1967 is an important year for the movement. The Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Parishad had held its conference in Bhusawal that year on 30 April. Speaking as the president of this conference, Dr M.N. Wankhade raised some fundamental questions. Reviewing the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the literature of the saints and modern Marathi literature, he noted that Dalit literature has no place in it. Like the Blacks, Dalit writers should revolt and produce their own literature through which they could present their problems.

Asmitadarsha: Quarterly with Literary Awe

The students and the staff of Milind College, Aurangabad wanted to have their own literary forum: so they established the Milind Sahitya Parishad. A fund was raised with the help of students and a new quarterly *Asmita* (now *Asmitadarsha*) was launched. In the very first issue, it included a discussion on the topic 'Cultural Conflict in Maharashtra and Literary Problems' which showed the direction in which Dalit literature was going. The magazine broke the feeling of suffocation which the Dalit writers faced. It encouraged the new generation of creative Dalit writers. The self-confidence which the Dalit writers gained helped them to take the movement still further. While established and socially conscious writers contributed regularly, a number of newcomers also joined them. Daya Pawar has traced the growth of this stream of authors in his article *'Upekshitanchya Navya Janeeva'* (New Concerns of the Neglected) in *Pratishthan* (July 69). The literary awe inspired by *Asmitadarsha* right from the beginning was not only because of Dalit writers and intellectuals but also because of progressive Marxist critics such as Sharatchandra Muktibodh, Waman Ingale, P.S. Nerurkar, Dr S.B. Karhade and Narayan Surve.

An Important Phase in the Movement

Yet another significant event in 1967 was the literary meet held in Bombay on behalf of the Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Sabha. This

meet brought together people from various places like Bombay, Aurangabad, Solapur and Nashik who were involved in the literary movement. The discussions held during the course of the conference helped to answer questions related to the movement and many things in common were discovered. The first representative collection of poems by the Dalits, *Akar*, was published in this conference. *Akar* included poems by Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Prof. Yadavrao Gangurde, Bandhumadhav, Chokha Kamble, Hira Bansode, etc. While *Akar* brought together Dalit poems for the first time in book form, except Baburao Bagul and one or two other poets, the poets did not appear to have any social awareness. Their poetry revolved around traditional, white-collar experiences. As a result the anthology failed to gain any attention or respect.

Baburao Bagul's second collection of short stories *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* (Death is Getting Cheaper) won the State award in 1968 — a landmark in the history of Marathi short stories — and hence became a topic of discussion. The white-collar writer of those days portrayed life in the slums 'artistically', from the white-collar point of view Neither the readers with entertainment-oriented middle-class tastes nor the elitist reviewers appreciated these stories with a new content. Their appraisal did not go beyond the techniques of expression. This was quite natural since Marathi critics were brought up in an environment of middle-class values, with no sociological base and with white-collar experiences. Nothing more was expected of them. As noted by Arjun Dangle in the *Maharashtra Times* (15 October 1972): 'It is difficult to write about Baburao's stories. Their shrewd rusticity and their jolting experiences take his stories much beyond the normal limits of the short story. These stories cannot be set in the framework of traditional values of art. The rationale for separate standards of criticism for Dalit literature can be found here.'

In spite of these attitudes of the elitist critics of white-collar reviewers, this collection of Bagul's was well received and the only reason for this was that Bagul presented harsh reality for the first time in Marathi literature.

An interesting point here is that this portrayal of harsh reality presented in Dalit literature or in Bagul's short stories was regarded very highly until Baburao Bagul explained how this literature came to be created. The same critics felt that the best stories of Bagul were valueless and of a propagandist nature when Bagul explained that the roots of this creation could be traced to particular social conditions.

Their attitude changed when Bagul spoke for change, denied the tradition they upheld and held up revolt, negativism and loyalty to science as his values, and opposed the communal, reactionary philosophy. Later Namdeo Dhasal, the reputed Dalit poet, also went through a similar experience.

White-collar Attitudes among Dalits

After 1968, thinking critics from Dalit society started to put forth their views about Dalit literature and its role. A number of younger writers appeared in periodicals such as *Asmitadarsha*. The factionalism in the Republican Party, the inaction of its leaders, the fatigue which had set into the Dalit movement and literature as a result of this inaction and the harsh social reality arising out of contemporary issues provided a backdrop to their writing. Almost all young Dalit writers started with poetry and unfurled various aspects of experience on various planes in their language. The poets Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Tryambak Sapkale, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, Umakant Randhir and J.V. Pawar, and short story writers Tarachandra Khandekar, Yogiraj Waghmare, Avinash Dolas, Yogendra Meshram and Bhimrao Shirwale are a few who developed during this period.

The effective and sharp standpoint of Dalit literature is seen in a discussion in the Diwali 1969 issue of the *Marathwada*. In their articles, Dr Wankhade, Prof. Chitnis, Daya Pawar and Baburao Bagul rejected the mainstream literary tradition and revolted so strongly that even thinkers and reviewers who were proud of their tradition were shocked.

It will be wrong to state that the idea of Dalit literature was rejected by all white-collar or upper-caste reviewers. In fact, critics like W.L. Kulkarni, D.K. Bedekar, R.G. Jadhav and Sharatchandra Muktibodh upheld it and, though their approbation had different shades, it was honest. However, as seen from the various meetings, seminars and discussions, the treatment meted out by most upper-caste reviewers to Dalit literature was stepmotherly. This can be understood, but some educated people from amongst the Dalits too viewed Dalit literature very negatively. They wanted to forget their past, could not face the harsh social realities surrounding them and were filled with an inferiority complex. They took all the benefits of

the concessions resulting from Dr Ambedkar's movement, but the movement made no impact on them. They believed that with their individual prosperity society also had prospered.

These 'Dalit Brahmins' felt (and feel even today) that Dalit literature was something dirty which had tarnished the image of their society. They wanted to speak, write, and live like Brahmins and missed no opportunity to ridicule Dalit literature.

The propaganda against Baburao Bagul's novel *Paushya*, then being serialized in *Amhi*, and against *Athvaninche Pakshi*, an autobiographical serial by Prof. P.E. Sonkamble, was the result of this attitude of the 'Dalit Brahmins'. *Paushya* portrayed society before the Ambedkar movement. *Athvaninche Pakshi* was a heart-rending portrayal of the mind of an orphan Dalit child and youth.

When one examines the views of these 'Dalit Brahmins' who equate the depiction of the pitiable conditions of the Dalits with their derogation — in particular, their views about society or about the means to change the contemporary social system, about revolutionary movements and struggles — one gets an idea not only of their middle-class attitude but also of their mental impotence. Not all well-placed Dalits, however, share this view-point.

The point to be noted is that just as the non-Dalit upper classes viewed Dalit literature in a particular way, the Dalit elite also saw it from its own angle. What is interesting is that those who maintained earlier that Dalit literature glorifies Maharwadas or Mangwadas and was communal, later proudly called themselves 'Dalit writers'. This might have been due to their opportunism but one cannot deny that it was also caused by the advance of the movement.

The Dalit Literary Meet at Mahad

During the same tumultuous period, a literary meet was held at Mahad by the Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Sabha. Mahad has a significant place in the history of the Dalit movement. Dr Ambedkar had begun his revolution here in 1927 with the Chavadar Tale Satyagraha and by making a bonfire of the *Manusmriti*.

Baburao Bagul presided over the literary meet and his presidential speech showed how well he deserved the honour. Emphasizing the necessity for a separate Dalit literature in view of the social, cultural and economic conditions in Maharashtra, he articulately defined Dalit

literature. The depth of his thoughts and reflections about Dalit literature was seen here and his meaningful approach was not only welcomed by Dalit writers and intellectuals but also by others. Hence it would not be an exaggeration to state that this meet was a revolutionary landmark in the Dalit literary movement. Various aspects of Dalit life and problems, so different from those of others, were discussed and developed scientifically and the philosophical foundation of Dalit literature in its relation to the social, cultural and political movement was highlighted so logically that many thought Bagul's speech was a manifesto of Dalit literature.

Rise of New Periodicals

The groping of Dalit writers was now over. They confidently expressed their feelings. *Asmitadarsha*, under the editorship of Prof. Gangadhar Pantavane, was an important platform for the Dalit literary movement. Contributions by Dalit writers also appeared in *Satyakatha*, *Pratishthan*, *Marathwada*, etc.

Dalit literature was proliferating rapidly and a quarterly like *Asmitadarsha* could not accommodate it all. Realizing the necessity for periodicals which would give Dalit writers their due place, Baburao Bagul launched *Amhi* with the help of his friends from all strata of society. *Amhi* was well received all over Maharashtra because of its wide-based standpoint. The publication however wound up within a year, for Baburao Bagul could not manage the practical business of running a periodical.

The vacuum so created was filled in to some extent by *Magova* — published first in April 1972 from Shahada (Dist. Dhule) — which got its strength from the Adivasi movement. Of all the periodicals run by non-Dalits, *Magova* took the most balanced view. The Dalits also felt a feeling of oneness with *Magova* as its views were based on sound sociological principles. Later *Magova* took an extreme leftist approach and was riddled with separatism. A number of friends including Dalit workers drifted away from the magazine owing to this separatism.

The Need for a New Point of View

Around the same time, that is, in 1972, another event occurred which shook the world of Marathi poetry and its traditional values: the

publication of *Golpitha*. In this collection of poems, the young poet Namdeo Dhasal aggressively expressed his experiences. While the critics were discussing another collection of Dalit poems, *Gaokusabaheril Kavita* by Waman Nimbalkar, *Golpitha*, which portrayed the explosive expression of the acute pain of the Dalits, raised a number of questions about values in Marathi literature and language.

Golpitha contained a language unfamiliar to Marathi literature. Just as we need to establish new values to appreciate Dalit literature, we need a new dictionary to understand its language. *Athvaninche Pakshi* by Prof. P.E. Sonkamble illustrates this point. The author has narrated a number of poignant memories and critical events in his life, using the original language of the Mahars. Sonkamble effectively portrays how shameful and difficult the childhood of an untouchable is. *Doha* by Shrinivas Kulkarni is a much discussed work in Marathi, which explores the mind of a child. Various beautiful nuances of nature seen in *Doha* do not appear in Sonkamble's writings. For how could someone whose mind is involved in the harsh conflict of life get attracted to nature? If an ivory-tower reviewer does not have an idea of the conflict, or understand the nuances of language in these experiences, how can he attempt a review of such a work? If he cannot grasp even the nature of such a work of art, how can he know its rhythm, the inscape of its experience, its form, its capacity for development?

If those who attempt to study the 'foreign snow' in the poetry of Grace or the Greek mythology in Dilip Chitre's poetry also attempt to understand the social reality and the literary manifestation of what sprouts from our own soil, a number of misconceptions can be avoided.

An invisible wall appears to stand between *Doha* and *Athvaninche Pakshi*. Various strata — of experience, thought, social status, etc. — appear in this wall. This weakens the belief that art is unrestricted and beyond any class. Nobody would insist that Marathi critics should live through all these experiences before writing their review. But it is not unreasonable to expect them to study the Indian social system, the caste system, the internal contradictions, the economic and social picture of a village, Indian culture, current Indian politics and so on.

The Birth of the Dalit Panthers

The dominant Maratha caste has tightened its grip on important economic centres in rural agriculture — such as land development banks, marketing federations, district banks, sugar factories — in the name of the co-operative movement which is being controlled almost in a capitalist-monopolist manner. The movement has been backed by the State.

This changed economic picture brought further misery to the Dalits in the village. The rich farmers and the bureaucracy controlled by them initiated a series of atrocities on the Dalits. Untouchable, landless Dalit labour fell prey to these atrocities. So did the worker in the Dalit movement, who raised his voice against them.

In cities and towns, the numbers of unemployed youth were increasing in droves as a result of the capitalist system. With the spread of education in the rural areas, there began to develop a class of educated Dalit youth, who had hitherto been kept away from the local economic or political system. Their association with workers of the leftist movements in rural areas gave them the ability to understand the entire system.

In Bombay, Baburao Bagul and his young Dalit writer friends Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Umakant Randhir, Ramdas Sorte and Prahlad Chendwankar met and had discussions for hours. The young generation was influenced by Baburao Bagul who had personally participated in the movement of Dalit labourers and who expressed himself clearly and logically.

The inaction of all factions of the Republican Party against social injustice was conspicuous. Except for support by one or two from the party, the other leftist parties were indifferent.

Dalit writers began to realize more and more that there was no point in merely writing provocative poetry against this injustice. They had become familiar with the Black movement and literature in the U.S.A. and were greatly attracted to it.

The result was that youths Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V. Pawar took the initiative and established the Dalit Panthers in Bombay on 9 July, 1972. The Panthers observed Independence Day that year, which incidentally was the silver jubilee of Independence, as Black Day and black-flag demonstrations were held at various places in Bombay. In the storm following Raja Dhale's article in the special issue of *Sadhana* in which he made strong comments about the Indian

national flag, the Panthers supported *Sadhana* and Raja Dhale. The Dalits of Maharashtra got acquainted with the Panthers and the discontent of several years began to explode.

I do not wish to discuss here the basis, points of differences of opinion or the future of the organization. The important point here is that the Dalit Panthers came to be established through the Dalit literary movement. The leaders of the Dalit Panthers were all writers. A wave of literature expressing one's experience in provocative language swept over Marathi literature. Maharashtra was again charged with discussions on Dalit literature and language. This was probably the first time in India that creative writers became politically active and led a movement.

Internal Conflict

The period between 1972 and 1978 can be regarded as the second stage in the Dalit literary movement. Several collections of short stories by Dalit writers were published and discussions on these were taking place. Like *Magova*, *Asmitadarsha* leaned towards the right. The split in the Dalit Panthers led to strife and an internal conflict about Marxism vis-a-vis Ambedkarism. This, I feel, was the handiwork of some who had vested personal interests.

Another non-literary group which was complementary to the Panthers was the one which believed in writing Buddhist literature instead of Dalit literature, as they were no longer Dalits, but neo-Buddhists. This group did not define Buddhist literature nor did they put forth their theoretical standpoint. The so-called Buddhist men of literature proved ineffectual because of lack of creativity and baseless propaganda.

During this period, Dalit literature had gained respectability. Several books, periodicals and special issues on Dalit literature were being published. But at the collective level the movement appeared stagnant. There were two reasons for this. One: the initial team spirit and action were being eroded and internal conflict substituted for these. Secondly, as some Dalit writers got recognition, new vested interests came to the fore.

The Period of Autobiographies

About the period between 1978 and 1986 nothing new need be said. A number of Dalit writers received State awards. Dalit literature came

to be included in school as well as university level textbooks. It was being translated into various Indian and foreign languages. New writers scattered all over cities, districts and villages shot into prominence and publishers were interested in the literary works of Dalits. The Dalit literary movement now spread to the other states and languages of India as well. Dalit literature no longer continued as a movement as there was no complementary social or political movement.

In other words, Dalit writers found it more necessary to maintain their own personal prestige than that of the movement. A number of Dalit literary works became well-known during this period which could well be said to be the period of autobiographies.

These autobiographies became famous for several reasons. An autobiography was not restricted to the life of a Dalit writer. It was a delineation of the social system, communalism, injustice, exploitation and of the lives of people who had been subjected to these evils. Written without glossing over any facts, these autobiographies not only enriched Marathi literature but also exposed the many facets of the Indian social system and the social and economic injustice nurtured by it. *Baluta* (Daya Pawar), *Athvaninche Pakshi* (Prof. P.E. Sonkamble) and *Upara* (Laxman Mane) are some remarkable autobiographies, while those written by women writers like Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawde, Mukta Sarvagod and Babytai Kamble are also noteworthy. The awards given by the Ford Foundation to *Baluta* and *Upara* are indicative of the responsibility shown by Dalit literature to raise Marathi literature to an international status. For, *Baluta* and *Upara* were the first Marathi books to win these awards.

In concluding the introduction to my *Dalit Sahitya — Ek Abhyas* I noted, 'The first to set their feet on the land of Dalit experiences were the Dalits themselves. Secondly, this literature of the Dalits is intimately related to social reality and is not imaginary or entertainment-oriented. The creation of Dalit literature is unavoidable and inevitable until the nature of this harsh social reality changes. I do not consider that all Dalit literature is great, nor do I insist that others should do so, but a major responsibility rests with Dalit writers in the event of the Ford Foundation awards.'

Problems facing Dalit Literature

After having made a rapid resume of the history of the Dalit literary movement, it is necessary, I feel, to discuss general points regarding the role of Dalit literature and its literary value. I wish to highlight mainly the following points:

1) Untouchability in the Indian social system and its cultural, social and economic effects.

2) Dr Ambedkar's movement and other movements in Maharashtra.

3) The acceptance of Buddhism by the Dalits.

4) Dalit literature vis-a-vis the tradition of Marathi literature.

5) The necessity for separate literary organizations, periodicals and literary meets in view of the separate nature and indispensability of Dalit literature.

6) Who are the Dalits?

7) New values of criticism and aesthetics.

8) A new mythology.

9) Repetition in the presentation of experiences.

10) Artistic neutrality.

11) Literature and social revolution.

12) Dalit and Black literatures.

13) Philosophies of Buddha, Marx and Ambedkar.

14) Dalit literature is not separatist.

Various aspects of these points have been and are being discussed. Dalit literature is the movement of creative artists and it is necessary that it grows in a healthy manner. I feel that to retain its momentum, it is necessary to keep in mind the above points.

Dalit writers should objectively examine themselves in the light of the following:

a) Very aggressive and crude language is used in the name of Dalit literature to write short stories on social injustice or atrocities. This is more so in the case of poetry.

b) Dalit literature is not restricted only to Buddhists (i.e. the Mahars of yesteryear).

c) One should not try to fit a short story or a poem forcibly into the framework of an 'ism'.

d) The portrayal of emotions in reaction to Dalit life should be done on various levels.

e) It is necessary to relate the revolutionary aspect of Dalit

literature with that of world literature.

f) Dalit writers should avoid striking the pose that a writer is different from others in society.

Society and literature are closely related. If we examine literature in the light of social change, we note that it is not the one and only medium to bring about that change. Each medium has its own in-built strength. It is inevitable that values of life are spread through literature, but if one does not have a correct estimate of the strength of this medium, one cannot use it effectively. It is an illusion to believe that literature alone can create a revolution. To bring about a revolution, one should have the necessary philosophy and a plan of action, and a group to implement them.

Of the points I have made above, it is necessary to discuss the second and the third points in detail. Just as these two points are related closely to the Dalit literary movement and its future, they are also associated with the political and social movements.

We shall emphasize only the literary aspect here. The scope of the Dalit literary movement should be widened and should not be restricted to the Buddhists. This question is not raised by writers; it also has political and social roots.

Dr Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi and the Struggle for Independence

A struggle to free untouchables took place in Maharashtra under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar. Of the untouchables, the Mahars who outnumbered the rest and were also more also more organized, loyally supported Dr Ambedkar. The other constituents of the untouchables — the Mangs, Chamars, Dhors, nomadic tribes etc. — did not participate in the movement as much as was expected of them. In fact they stayed away.

One reason for this separatist tendency was in the Freedom Movement and the campaigns for the upliftment of the untouchables, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Another reason may be found in the internal conflict caused amongst the untouchables by the social system.

The Mahars had no place in the rural economy. They had no traditional profession, no land to till, no means of production. They had to do any available work in the village and lived on left-over food doled out by the upper castes. On the other hand, the remaining

untouchable castes had their traditional means of livelihood. For instance, making ropes was the job of the Mangs. Secondly, the Mahars had a martial tradition and were well organized. Thirdly, Dr Ambedkar himself was a Mahar. All these factors contributed to their participation in Dr Ambedkar's movement.

There were strong differences of opinion between Dr Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi regarding the upliftment of Dalit society. It was not in the interest of Mahatma Gandhi or the Indian National Congress to allow the influence of Dr Ambedkar to extend to all untouchables, as Dr Ambedkar actively participated in politics and opposed the Congress. The Congress began to build up leadership at the national level from amongst other groups of Dalits to stop the advance of Dr Ambedkar, and this brought Babu Jagjivan Ram into prominence. Dr Ambedkar opined that the Congress was a handmaiden of the c .pitalists and the upper castes.

Internal Conflict among the Dalits

The Mahars who derived their energy from the movement led by Dr Ambedkar later began to shine in various fields. This started a cultural conflict which continues even today. Dr Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 was a revolutionary change in the life of the Dalits, which was conspicuous in their socio-cultural life and also in their mental make-up.

Therefore one should view this conversion to Buddhism not only as a religious event but also in its socio-cultural context. It is regrettable that not all untouchables became Buddhists. Barring a few, most Dalit writers and artists are Buddhists and hence Dalit literature today is not as wide-based as it should have been.

This width is not regarding the role of writers but with reference to experiences of other Dalits and their participation in the movement. The life and experiences of Chamars, Mangs, Dhors, Holars. Ramoshis, Bhils, nomadic tribes, Nandiwale, Adivasis etc. need to be portrayed. We find an educated class being formed in these groups. But there are not many writers. These groups neither accepted the revolutionary leadership of Dr Ambedkar nor did they as a group join leftist parties. Their leaders tried to compromise with the establishment and gain some profits for themselves. Thus the aggressive fearlessness found amongst the Buddhist youths is lacking

in them, but some signs of it have begun to appear now.

Buddhist Philosophy, Marxism and Dr Ambedkar

It is necessary to discuss the theoretical differences among the philosphies of Dr Ambedkar, Buddhism and Marxism. Some feel that Ambedkarism and Buddhism are diagonally opposite to Marxism. This conflict is important, as the splits in the Dalit movement at various times are over this issue. In 1958, the Republican Party split on the issue of co-operation with the Communists. In 1975, the Dalit Panthers broke up for the same reason. One sees two main streams in the Dalit literary movement: one of those who believe that the philosophies of Ambedkar and Buddha are complete in themselves and the other, of those who also wish to seek help from Communism and Socialism.

Dr Ambedkar was not a fierce opponent of Marxism. In the World Buddhist Conference held in Kathmandu in November 1956, when speaking on 'Buddhism and Communism' he maintained that the two were similar. The only difference between the two was that while Marxism does not reject violence to achieve power, Buddhist philosophy emphasizes non-violence, mercy, love, and so on.

Even earlier, on 28 October 1954, Dr Ambedkar, speaking at the Purandare Stadium in Bombay, had declared, 'Let others go where they will. We will follow the path of Jyotiba. We may or may not take Marx with us but we will certainly not abandon Jyotiba's philosophy.' This does not mean that Ambedkar supported Marxism; however, he was not blindly opposed to it. He had full faith in democracy. But to him it was not only a political system, but also a system for the establishment of egalitarian values in social and economic life. He fought for it throughout his life, fearing no one.

It will be useful to know why there is a debate regarding only Ambedkarism, Marxism and Buddhism in the context of Dalit literature. Why is there no parallel discussion about the philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi, Golwalkar Guruji or Hitler?

The answer is quite simple. The source of inspiration for Dalit literature is the centre of Dr Ambedkar's movement — the common man, exploited on the economic, social and cultural fronts. Marxism centres around such exploitation and Buddhist philosophy too talks about the common man and his miseries. These philosophies reflect

the rebellious reactions against exploitation during the periods when these philosophies developed. Both these philosophies consider how to foster the development of man, and while, in place and time, they appear different, the core of the two philosophies is common, namely, freedom from exploitation. Dalit literature is also one such reaction against exploitation, expressed in words, and hence I believe that these three philosophies do not oppose but in fact complement one another. In stating this I have considered only the basic philosophy of Buddhism and Marxism and have not considered the practice of Buddhism at present or in other countries or the manner and the mental attitude of the Communist party workers in India.

In fact I believe that any philosophy or school of thought preaching against exploitation is complementary to Dalit literature. In case of philosophy in a creative work of art, it should be remembered that principles or details of philosophy are not enunciated as they are in a work of art. The philosophy or school of thought shapes the consciousness and attitudes of the artist, and arising out of this relation is the creation which has a personality of its own. The core of Ambedkarism is the rebellious reaction against exploitation and the call to free man. To judge the personality of a Dalit literary work against this core will do justice to the work. However, I firmly believe that an artist seeking change should not follow a philosophy blindly or with blinkers.

Dalit Literature and Traditional Criticism

The reins of cultural and literary movements were generally in the hands of the upper classes and castes and the tradition was (and still is) to accept the values set by them as standard. The ordinary man from the lower classes was out of the picture, and his life, experiences and feeling — looking at the history of Indian literature — were never the subject of art. Whenever such people have been portrayed, the portrayal has been distorted.

In recent times, the common man has become the hero in Indian literature but here again one sees the influence of traditional values cultivated by the establishment.

The reviewers and the method of review are also influenced in the same manner. For example, if we take plays like *Natasamrat*, *Udhvasta Dharmashala* and *Julus* or a film like *Samna*, we find that

reviewers have hailed *Natasamrat* and *Udhvasta Dharmashala* above the other two. The first two are works which portray the tragedy of the intellectual or the artist while the last two depict the tragedy of the common man. The first two are in a philosophical and mysterious language, so our reviewers are greatly impressed by them. Their feeling is that someone who speaks in this language alone has understood the meaning of life. Authors of works in the latter category are judged second-rate because they express their problems of daily life in their own words. The viewpoint of traditional criticism is that a work of art depicting the tragedy of an intellectual is great and that of the common man, mediocre.

Dalit literature portrays the hopes and aspirations of the exploited masses. Their fight for survival, their daily problems, the insults they have to put up with, their experiences and their outlook towards all these events are portrayed in Dalit literature. It is quite natural to feel that the image of Marathi literature — characterized by mysticism, philosophy and ethereal happiness — was tarnished by these 'unliterary and down-to-earth subjects.

An author is first and foremost a social being. Few realize that he is capable of viewing and examining an event from different aspects. When Dalit writers look at the scorching social reality and respond to it in an aggressive, bitter manner, their writing is condemned as loud and propagandistic.

In other words, when a writer is oriented towards thinking in terms of social change, he is termed propagadist. Those who brand him thus themselves follow a certain philosophy by which they could be termed propagandists. All literature for that matter is propagandistic, the difference being that in some cases one insists on the so-called literary values and in others, on values of life.

Tradition and Dalit Literature

A question discussed quite often regarding Dalit literature is whether or not to accept tradition. The Dalit literary intellectuals totally reject tradition while the non-Dalits maintain that tradition cannot be rejected and only what is not required should be thrown out Whenever Dalit intellectuals reject tradition, the point raised is that tradition has to be enriched, not rejected.

It is absolutely necessary to know what it means to maintain or

enrich tradition. A tradition is born and lives on the strong foundations of thoughts and principles and it is these thoughts or principles which enrich or sustain a tradition. The base that a tradition gets is subject to the then existing social system and the sum total of the conditions. The established class always tries to establish a convenient tradition that does not damage its vested interests. The weak groups in society are tied to this tradition. In fact, all our traditions so far, whether religious, social, literary or cultural, have been imposed on the majority by a handful.

What exactly should the Dalit writers do to maintain or enrich tradition? Should they take Lord Vithoba to every household through their poetry, or should they busy themselves in describing the rajas and maharajas and their feasts and revelries, or be obsessed with stars, flowers, the sun and the wind and other natural phenomena? Or should they be lost in a false world of feeling or consider man a helpless puppet in the hands of the supernatural? Should they indulge in sexually explicit narrative in the name of psychoanalysis? If we consider the ideology, the negativism, the revolt, the scientific objectivity and the sociological basis of Dalit literature, we see that the traditions or streams kept alive in different phases of Marathi literature automatically collapse. If one stretches the chain of Dalit literary tradition back to the life of Keshavsut, the pioneer poet of modern Marathi, or of the novelist Hari Narayan Apte, both of whom wrote with the purpose of social awakening, there is a possibility that the links will snap.

The word 'tradition' here is deceptive. It takes the form of regression and shows signs of stagnation. Whenever new values, new thinking are put forth, the word 'tradition' is used as a shield. The Marathi literary tradition is about nine hundred years old while that of Dalit literature is hardly sixty to seventy years old.

When the machine age reached India, it was accompanied by new knowledge, science, revolutionary philosophy which led to the struggle for equality. The Dalits realized that they too had their traditions when their 'self' was awakened during some such movements. They began an attempt to accept new timeless values of life, society and culture.

The apparent desire of Dalit writers of cutting the umbilical cord from traditional Marathi literature may seem to some like a separatist step. But I feel that Dalit writers are not separatist; it is Marathi literature which is separatist. Has this literature, with its long tradition, given people from

the lowest stratum of society their proper due?

Marathi criticism lacks a theoretical or sociological base. That is why some reviewers blindly cite the traditions of Dnyaneshwar-Balkavi-Arati Prabhu or Tukaram-Keshavsut-Mardhekar. They see a superfluous similarity in diction when they speak of this tradition, but they hardly try to seek the common theoretical thread running through it.

Dalit Literature and Mythology

This approach of rejecting tradition also explains the need for new myths in Dalit literature. The problems facing Marathi literature and criticism are basically different from those of Dalit literature and criticism. As Marathi writers and reviewers have cut off literature from life, Marathi criticism does not go beyond *Dnyaneshwari*, *Smritichitre*, *Ranangan* or *Kosala*. If writers examine life in its social and physical aspects, the problems of life, their intensity, the struggle against them will all be portrayed in their work. The artist is a part of society and he should not hold society in contempt.

In saying that Marathi literature is cut off from reality what is meant is that this literature portrays the life of a handful of people or paints a romantic picture. Most Marathi writers belong to the middle class and the middle class too is facing problems in the present economic condition. The collapsing joint family system, eroding values, insults, humiliation and conflict are some of the major problems confronting the middle class. How many of these middle-class conditions and problems are reflected in Marathi literature? Many youths are today involved in revolutionary struggles or work amongst Dalits, Adivasis and landless labourers. How many Marathi writers have written about them?

The point is that most Marathi literature is not parallel to life. On the other hand Dalit literature looks at reality with open eyes. It views history objectively and from a sociological point of view. It is more parallel to life, and this poses a number of problems and the question of 'myths' stated above.

Dalit literature opposes exploitation and atrocities. Dalit writers cannot accept the social values of an exploiting system, and those who accept these values cannot be their ideals.

Dalits cannot accept Rama, who deserted Sita and killed Shambuka, as their ideal. One could cite a number of such examples

where myths accepted by traditional Marathi literature cannot be accepted by Dalit literature and its ideology.

There is a point of view that Dalit writers should seek myths in Buddhism. Dr Ambedkar had accepted Buddhism after analysing it critically, objectively, with a scientific approach. In *Buddha and his Dhamma* he relates Buddhism to the values of the modern age. Does all Buddhist literature discuss Buddha's philosophy, atheism, his theory of causality? Dr Ambedkar distinguishes between the preaching of Buddha and the Buddhism of a later period. Neither Dr Ambedkar nor Dalit writers can accept the literature developed during the period after Buddha, in which immorality and ritualism held sway.

Besides, the tradition and culture of ancient India does not contain anything which a Dalit can own with pride. Dalit writers can accept some myths from the Puranas, history or Buddhist literature. But if myths are to be really discovered, they have to be found by the Dalit writers in their own tradition which is not more than eight decades old. To me, it will be more useful and practical to study the history of those periods when the Dalits' struggle for freedom took place or when new revolutionary philosphies were preached and revolutionaries were born, than to study the Puranas or religious literature. One finds such Dalit myths being used in Dalit poetry.

New Connotations of the Word 'Dalit'

When Dalit literature began to be talked about, a number of doubts were raised as to its nature. While some believed that any such new avenue could not be opened, some others considered it communal. Some observed timidity in this unity. None of these doubts exists today. Initially the discussion centred around Buddhist (or Mahar) youths as they led the movement. Later on it was realized that while defining Dalit literature, Dalit writers and intellectuals had clearly stated that it was not the literature of a particular caste. Their stand from the beginning is broad-based and well-developed.

Let us now see what is Dalit literature and who are Dalit writers. Is Dalit literature the literature of those born in Dalit caste?

Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those

in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.

As a result of this realization, experiences are not simply stated but their meaning is also explained. It is out of this realization that the Dalits consider works such as the poetry of Narayan Surve, *Ek Gav Ek Panvatha* by Baba Adhav or *Jevha Manus Jaga Hoto* by Godavari Parulekar as their own. They also feel one with the Samantar literary movement in Hindi. On the other hand the works of some Dalit writers are seen as being suffocated by white-collar or traditional values.

The difference between the works of the two kinds of writers is not just because of their castes but also due to differing experiences and their ways of interpreting them. Thus, though caste is at the root of most Dalit literature, as its literary manifestation is based on its experiences, the horizons of Dalit literature are expanding. But the non-Dalit writers do not like to call themselves Dalits. They feel that to do so is below their dignity. As a result the process of expansion of art is retarded. To use Marxist jargon, many authors avoid joining the 'D' class. This is not only true of non-Dalits but also of the educated and the secure among the Dalits themselves.

The reason for this, I feel, is that the word 'Dalit' traditionally connotes wretchedness, poverty and humiliation. Hence the term has become derogatory. The non-Dalits therefore pose the question: why should we call ourselves Dalits? But with reference to the Dalit literary movement, we have not used the traditional meaning of the term but have added a new dimension and content to it.

'Dalit' means masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally, in the name of religion and other factors. Dalit writers hope that this exploited group of people will bring about a revolution in this country.

The Future of Dalit Literature

Poetry and autobiographical writing are amply found in Dalit literature and have been tackled efficiently. Differing contentwise, experiences have been expressed on various planes. But short stories, novels and drama have been the neglected areas. In case of short stories and novels, one hears names such as Baburao Bagul, Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat. However, there is not a single

worthwhile name in connection with Dalit drama. The more effectively these forms are handled, the more powerful will Dalit literature be in future.

While considering the future of Dalit literature we should not restrict ourselves only to a discussion on how many forms have been handled by Dalit literature. Dalit literature is not simply literature. It is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people. It is a movement.

Today, most Dalit writers have forgotten that Dalit literature is a movement. Dalit literature and writers are becoming part of the establishment. They are busy calculating how they can get all honours from the establishment. A calm, similar to one after a storm, today prevails in the Dalit literary movement.

Yet I am not worried about the future of Dalit literature. Dalit literature revolts against oppression and exploitation and demands social and economic justice. Today politics is based on religion. Conditions are extremely fluid and Dalit writers cannot be silent and neutral witnesses to such events in the social system. The values of democracy, secularism and socialism are being eroded.

The mix-up of politics and religion in our country is the beginning of a long struggle. Various parties of the Dalits and the exploited will fight on the political plane in their own way. But Dalit writers will have to participate boldly in the struggle. The participation of Dalit writers is unavoidable and inevitable. The point is to see to what extent will the writers and literature which is moving towards establishment, participate in it. Even if they don't, the new generation of Dalit writers will join the movement in full strength as the struggle and Dalit literature cannot be separated. The creation of Dalit literature is inevitable until the structure of society changes and as long as exploitation exists. The new generation will join in more aggressively and maturely. To remain close to the struggle and the masses, they will have to handle various forms of literature and one can see signs of these changes. Though they will not receive the grand welcome and appreciation accorded to Dalit writers of the early period, the path of literature will show powerful traces of their passage through it. The future of Dalit literature may not be glamorous, but it is certainly dazzling.

Translated by Avinash S. Pandit &
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SHARATCHANDRA MUKTIBODH

What is Dalit Literature?

Dalit literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. Human freedom is the inspiration behind it. That is its implied value. The nature of this literature consists in a rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits — in the past and even at present — in the framework of the *varna* system. A feeling of rebellion is invariably accompanied by an extreme psychological commitment. As Dalit sensibility seeks to bring about compatible changes in the social consciousness, it is rebellious as well as fundamentally optimistic and revolutionary.

The nature of Dalit consciousness is obviously not subjective. It is true that pains and pleasures are lived and experienced by individuals alone but the sufferings of the Dalits are common and are attributable to common reasons. Hence their content is essentially social.

The Dalit point of view constitutes a clear diagnosis of a particular social reality and a sanguine hope for its desirable transformation. The Dalit sensibility shows a deep concern for the Dalit point of view and an outstanding work of Dalit literature would be born only when Dalit life would present itself from the Dalit point of view.

A Dalit point of view would not necessarily lead to an insight into Dalit life but the latter definitely presumes the existence of the former.

Now, a Dalit point of view could be held by an orator, an essayist or a social worker. It is expected to be presented logically; it must be convincing and it must reflect itself in the personal behaviour of its protagonists; but a thought, even when presented excitedly, is after all, a thought. It has to be set forth consistently; it must stand to reason or at least appear to do so.

A Dalit writer is bound to have a Dalit point of view; but this is not enough for a literary artist. It is essential for him to experience a Dalit insight of his own, through it. This is true of any point of view. A Marxist view, for instance, would not necessarily produce a Marxist work of art. That cannot come into being unless the view is transformed into the artist's vision.

What we mean by the transformation of a Dalit point of view into a Dalit insight is thus an important question and is vitally related to great literature.

It is evident that a point of view is not synonymous with life itself; it is an intellectual cartograph of an aspect of life, which it illuminates and elucidates. There is as much difference between a Dalit view and a Dalit vision as there is between having a look at the map of a city and actually living in that city.

This fact could be explained in a different way. Life is not lived within the rigid confines of a point of view and one does not have only such experiences as are essential to prove a controversial viewpoint. Life is lived totally, at all levels and in the totality of experience. When a view of life is experienced by a writer, in its multiform, distinct totality, he could be said to have had a 'vision' of his own point of view.

In short, a writer can be said to have Dalit insight, when he experiences a Dalit viewpoint in the form of various distinctive lives of individuals which are full of pleasure and pain.

The formalists have spread, maybe in their ignorance, the view that when a writer writes from a particular viewpoint, it limits his art. The view is, however, not without some ground.

Haribhau Apte was an outstanding literary artist. He wanted to show how a woman's life was shattered in the old joint family system. He presented a living picture of the problem in his novel *Pan Lakshat Kon Gheto?* (Who Cares to Heed?). He undoubtedly had his own vision of feminine bondage. His artistic level, however, cannot be said to be on par with that of Sharatchandra Chaterji. This is mainly because of the considerable simplification of life by Haribhau in order to depict Yamu's suffering. He has lessened the particularity of life and confined the portrayal of the minds of his characters to a certain set of circumstances. As far as Marathi literature is concerned, this attitude makes its appearance in almost all literary works which set out to present a distinctive point of view.

They resort to the simplification of life to the extent that it helps to assert and prove the point proposed by the writer. The result is a misapprehension of life, which is represented in gaudy colours merely with a view to serving a particular purpose. This gives reason to the formalists to contend that the artist's point of view limits the artistic merit of his creation. Formalists themselves, however, are not free from this predicament. Our individualistic literary tradition is not any

different. The point of view behind it has certainly set limits to its artistic merit; but this fact does not occur to the formalists, as they have unknowingly harboured a wrong impression that everything that is asocial is artistic. Today's individualistic literature also has a distinct viewpoint. The human mind is caught between two irresistible forces; one being the primitive passions which occupy the mysterious depths of the mind of an individual and the other being the inconjecturable, frightening destiny which is outside the mind of an individual. Primitive passions are indestructible; and destiny is unpredictable, cruel and resolute. It is the individual who struggles against it and is crushed in its tight grasp. The present individualistic literature has not been able to emerge from this point of view, and it seeks to prove it by having recourse to the gaudiest simplification of life. This could be said to be its characteristic attribute. It is commonly believed today that the more this literature deviates from reality the greater is its artistic merit. No one points to the limits it sets to artistic merit. Is this not surprising? To probe this one has to turn to socio-psychological objective analysis; but this is not the point before us at present.

However, we must admit that when even a literature with extreme involvement with and commitment to a particular point of view depicts life merely for the sake of serving its limited purpose, it limits its own artistic quality. To be committed to a point of view or to have excessive faith in it is not a fault. Many writers, including Dickens, Tolstoy and Gorky lived for their convictions and produced literature. In fact all great literature is committed to life and this commitment has expressed itself through the great point of view of the time. Those who produced this great literature had not accepted that point of view as an abstract thought, but had a concrete vision of it through their experience.

It could be said in conclusion that a Dalit point of view accompanied by Dalit consciousness would not necessarily result in great Dalit literature. But an original and important Dalit work of literature would emerge only when a Dalit point of view would visualize itself through concrete experience. It will also prove to be a deep and powerful picture of human life thirsty for freedom in the real sense.

We must look at Dalit literature from this angle and have the same expectation from it. Indian life still remains to be penetrated in the real sense. Dalit literature can perform this task through Dalit

experience. Hence this little discussion. Let us say at the end that Dalit literature is one which is produced out of a Dalit vision.

Translated by Anil Ragunath Kulkarni

BABURAO BAGUL

Dalit Literature is but Human Literature

Origins of Suffering

Ever since the rise of property rights in human society, various concepts and principles have been formulated as and when required by those in power — concepts and principles which justify exploitative power, sorrow, misery, slavery, meaningless religious rituals and the notions of heaven and hell. With this, primeval ideas about the republic declined, and the organization of culture and society came to be totally governed by the exploitative state.

A Comprehensive Vision

The rise of the autocratic state and the decline of the republican state coincided with the emergence of Bhagwan Buddha's Dhamma. This great compassionate prophet observed the concentration of wealth, the wars resulting from the fierce struggle to acquire wealth and power, the ensuing violence and the ever-growing inequality, sorrow, misery and servitude. Turning the wheel of Dhamma he showed where sorrow originated. He prescribed ways of eradicating sorrow, and condemned the exploitative principles and the social structure and attitudes shaped by them. The autocratic, exploitative state, however, did not crumble, nor could the concentration of wealth and power be arrested, nor did the slaves become free. The idea of socialization of wealth and power could not prevail. More and more wars were fought; the number of serfs increased. Those who owned more power, more wealth and more arms also became the owners of a larger number of slaves. Entire nations became slaves. Inequality became increasingly pervasive. The prevailing social and intellectual order was further entrenched by the doctrines promoting divisions of *varna* and class. The entire social fabric was being burnt down by the fire of inequality. A democratic society could be found only in the Sangha of Bhagwan Buddha. Here, people from different castes and classes were coming

together to integrate, as rivers flowing into the sea, living a happy life of equality and peace in the form of social democracy.

The Nature of the Exploitative State

The exploitative state has a peculiar characteristic: it allows only those doctrines and institutions to survive and prosper which help its exploitative nature to proliferate; and it either pollutes or destroys those principles and opinions which are in fact constructive. The exploitative state needed inequality and untouchability, and so it sustained and cultivated them, shaping thought and culture accordingly. On the other hand, the principles which opposed inequality and untouchability were either destroyed totally, or were contaminated and suppressed.

The ruling power finds that anti-spiritualism and atheism fail to protect its class interests. If these principles are accepted, they would automatically dissolve the concept of the Almighty God and His holiness, and also the religious and penal power systems which represent that holiness. These principles erase the sacred boundary erected and sanctified by religion, between the superior and the inferior. The inequality created by God simply vanishes. In such circumstances, it is possible for anybody to rise simply on the basis of merit and achievement. All this is death to the autocratic state. On the other hand, the very principles of anti-spiritualism and atheism are vital for the republican state; in fact they inhere in it.

Buddhism cannot be the natural disposition of the exploitative state or society founded on inequality. Since it spontaneously opposes the inequality in the exploitative state, Buddhism could become a guiding force at the time when the autocratic state was expanding itself. It could, however, function only as an ideal. Isolated individuals or small groups could look up to it as a guiding light and were attracted by it. Gradually, they all started joining the Sangha. The *bhikhus* were from all the classes — the oppressed, the oppressors and the rulers. And they all enjoyed the happy life of a casteless and classless society in the Sangha, and also participated in the welfare of the masses. The Buddhist Sangha was an oasis in a desert. The entire society, the age itself, favoured the exploitative state. It was for this reason that the exploitative state could not allow Buddhist principles to form the basis of a social order and consciousness. Buddhism therefore fought

against it at all levels for centuries. With the exploitative rule reaching its acme, inequality and untouchability were deeply entrenched into the socio-cultural fabric. The entrenchment was so deep that Bodhisatva, the hero of the Jataka tales, could never come from the downtrodden castes. There are heroes who are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and even birds and beasts; in comparison, few are from the oppressed classes. The reason was that the oppressed classes lacked the necessary facilities. This means that the concept of untouchability was rather closely tied up with many other concepts, and all rules and all powers had accepted it as a natural phenomenon.

Property Rights : Varna *and Caste*

Varna and caste came to be determined on the basis of birth. This was because the ruling class wanted to ensure for itself the exclusive possession of wealth, power and higher social status, and also because they did not want the sorrow, misery and servitude imposed on the oppressed to be transferred to the other sections of society. And birth was in turn conceived as being inevitably founded upon deeds of the previous births (karma), upon the good or evil actions of previous lives and upon divine justice. This firmly and irreversibly fixed an individual in a particular *varna* and a particular caste. It was indeed a Machiavellian act of manipulating the institution of property rights — achieved with great skill and extreme crookedness. As a result, society became frighteningly divided due to inequality. The dominant classes needed the fragmentation to protect their class interests. The fundamental division was: people who were endowed with wealth, comfort, power, proximity to God and claiming to represent the divine, on the one hand; and on the other, those who were supposedly found damnable by God and religion, eternally condemned to a life of sorrow, misery, servitude and untouchability. In the name of divine retribution and divine will the latter were denied every form of deliverance and salvation. As a result, they were completely left out of the process of social production.

Changes in the social means of production and their owners lead to changes in the class structure and result in social progress. But since there was no development of the social process of production, even these changes in the class structure did not materialize.

Divine Origin

The idle talk of sinful or meritorious deeds, rebirth, fatalism, destiny, etc. was spread and sanctified by those who had themselves been raised to the status of divinity and enshrinement. The oppressing class and the exploitative social structure which perpetrated injustice, atrocities, sorrow and misery were deliberately made inconspicuous, while God, who was in fact abstract and invisible, was projected to vindicate them. Thus, the oppressed could never find the real oppressors, and as a result, there is no evidence of the Dalits having collectively risen in protest against exploitation. The structure would, by design, never allow them even to perceive their miserable condition. The Indian way of life, in fact, condemns collective action and propounds the doctrine that *moksha*, i.e. deliverance or salvation, is to be achieved by the individual.

The propaganda of the oppressors took the following form: all misery originates in the human body; had it not been for the human body, there would have been no misery, no misfortune; misery and misfortune end with death, and hence living itself is miserable; living involves the activity of desire and passion; therefore, life itself should be annihilated. Such a propaganda automatically suppresses social consciousness and the feeling of fraternity, anger and resistance which emanate from that collective consciousness. Working at all levels, Hindu feudalism has seen that the common man would lose all his ability to feel pain and comprehend reality, to see who caused the suffering. In addition, it has employed the military, the police, the jail, and the scriptures as well, and has given all these divine sanctity. It can be deduced from this that during this immense historical stretch, the ruling class could have, if it wanted to, allowed a certain opinion to survive and thrive which was antagonistic to this kind of intellectual and social organization. Buddhism thrived when the State permitted anti-spiritualism, atheism, rationalism, and a progressive attitude to grow. But when the exploitative State found it inconvenient, it destroyed it with the help of military power or by some devious means. The fault therefore lies not with a particular caste, but with the Hindu feudal system. The entire system was founded on monarchy. The age itself gave rise to and nurtured the doctrines of sacredness, holiness and divinity being revealed or appearing as avatar or incarnation. It is

in this age that we find the first appearance of all the prophets and all the religions.

War-like Character

The brave heroes upon whom Hinduism has bestowed sacredness and divinity, have in fact fought for power. Their wars and the stories about them have been sanctified as holy scriptures. Moreover, a number of Hindu festivals too have, as a matter of fact, been celebrations of such wars. The rulers who were vanquished in these wars have been demonized while the victors have been glorified and made divine. Violent traits of character such as jealousy, malice, scorn, hatred, enmity and vengefulness have been cherished ideals with a cultural significance. These tendencies clearly indicate that war has been in the forefront of the Hindu value structure. As power and rule were transferred to another *varna* and another sect, there was a compromise and new social ideals emerged. Had this trend been sustained, the hero who disgraced Sita and Shurpanakha, who burnt down the Khandava-vana, would not have found a place in the holy scriptures and temples. He would not have been celebrated as a mythical ideal. But the power and the rule remained in the hands of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. As a result, those who contributed to the establishment of their rule were glorified as heroes and gods. The social structure was shaped in accordance with the desires of these ruling *varnas*. Consequently, mythology and cultural consciousness remained attuned to their ideals and literature was shaped according to their norms. The offspring of inequality — such as contempt, malice and pride — continued to be the celebrated traits, while ideas such as love, compassion, fraternity and equality remained marginalized in literature and society.

Christ: Different Ideals

Jesus Christ propounded the existence of God and His Heavenly Kingdom. He considered himself to be the dearest Son of God. Because they committed the Original Sin, Adam and Eve were driven away from Paradise. The man-woman relationship was believed to be sinful. But it was also believed that if you followed Jesus i.e. if you inculcated virtues such as love, compassion, service, fraternity,

equality, sacrifice and tolerance God would bestow His love upon you. God's love could also be attained through repentance and prayer. These are the principles which underlie Christian society, culture and literature. It is because of these values that in spite of the division between the rich and the poor, between the haves and the have-nots, there is a place for the most unfortunate and the most miserable sections of the masses in Christianity and its literature. As against this, the Shudras and the Atishudras — the lowest of the castes and those who were kept totally outside the caste framework — failed to find any place in the religious and secular literature of the Hindus. This was because the gods and the scriptures of Hinduism have in fact treated the downtrodden and the weak as enemies, indulging in vicious propaganda against them. Now, if God and His books themselves indulge in spreading hatred, malice, scorn and pride, can we expect the Shudras and the Atishudras to find a place in literature and society? It is for this reason that values such as liberty, equality and fraternity, rationality, and the more recent ideas of democracy and socialism, have no mythical significance in the society and the literature of the Hindus. They have no roots, no normative basis in Hinduism. Even the literature of the saints has failed to accommodate them. Racism, fascism and perversity, on the other hand, occupy a large domain.

Sanskrit Literature

The heroes of the religious literature and the belle-lettres in Sanskrit belong only to the ruling sections and to those sections which contributed to the value structure of Hinduism, which voted for it and fought on its behalf. We have already seen that these heroes were accorded divine status and were placed in temples. It is only their lives which became themes in literature. None of those who were condemned by the religious and the ruling powers acquired divine, heroic or even sub-heroic status. This clearly means that religious and imaginative literature in Sanskrit was committed to the religious and the ruling establishments. It has flourished in great quantity, praising the kings and the emperors of the upper *varnas* and eulogizing the gods. Apart from the two ruling *varnas*, viz, the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, no other *varnas* have appeared in Sanskrit literature; there may be hardly a

couple of exceptions to this rule. Wealth, power and education were monopolized by these two dominant *varnas*, as a result of which Sanskrit literature could hardly transcend the limits of the Smritis or the sacred canon. This has made it highly monotonous. With its commitment to the *varna* system and the intellectual framework underlying the system, Sanskrit literature can hardly provide the mythical foundation and the total tradition for Dalit literature.

Literature of the Saints

Then the Islamic invasion started rocking India. The literature of the saints emerged in the period of the victory of the Islamic power and the decline of the Hindu State. Its main function was to prop up the crumbling Hindu State and curb the proliferation of Islam. As a result, it succeeded only in spreading the ideology underlying the *varna* system.

In this period of anarchy and chaos — an age of decline of the Hindu saints and the rise of the Muslim saints — protagonists of the various sections of society started emerging: from among the Shudras, the Atishudras, and from among women. Had the Hindu oppressive power not crumbled under Islamic attack, we would not have seen the miracle of artists, intellectuals and protagonists emerging from these classes. Society became creative, however briefly, as the Hindu oppressive machinery became ramshackle.

Later the Muslim states stabilized. Hindu rulers survived either by accepting a subservient position under the Muslim rule or by remaining sovereign. This again led to the reappearance of the oppressive *varna* system. The Muslim rulers decided to retain the Hindu social structure as they found that it was ideally suited for oppressive purposes. By the time the British arrived, the creative potential in society had completely withered. In fact the literature of the saints belongs to this period of transition. It was written against the background of centuries of warfare. What kind of literary composition could we expect in such an age?

The 'saint' literature (i.e. literature of the Hindu saints) composed in wartime was totally committed to the *varna* system and its intellectual and literary norms. The conventions created by Sanskrit literature — its concepts, theories, heroes, and the principles promoting oppression — were all accepted and

expressed by the saint literature in toto. As a result, the exploitative *varna* system was further strengthened. Even the Islamic society in India internalised the caste system and its underlying value structure. The *bhakti* , or the feeling of devoutness, expressed by the saints could not spread the message of social equality. Their critical attempts failed to become social ideals or mythic norms. The *bhakti-marga* , or the path of devotion, was widely accepted; and yet, different bands of devotees remained committed to the ideology of the caste system. Belief in fatalism and the doctrines of karma and rebirth was pervasive; so was the attitude expressed in 'Be as God has made thee.' The Hindu feudal state needed precisely such an intellectual and social system, and so it sustained it.

Advent of the British and of Science

The British came and conquered India, defeating the Hindu and the Muslim saints. With them came new knowledge and science, new machines and technologies, new occupations and business. The transformation of the social system of production began, and with it the social framework was reduced to a wreck. There was sufficient scope for a new intellectual system to take root. The new awakening of the Western Enlightenment began illuminating minds, and as a result self-critical thinking became possible. The new self-critical attitude, along with the study of imaginative literature, gave rise to new literary expression. For the first time, literature tried to express social themes rather than metaphysical, transcendental or religious ones.

The elite *varnas* had, in the past, been in the forefront of social life due to the status accorded to them by religion, and had possessed economic, religious and political power. Posing their own domestic problems as the central issues, the same *varnas* now became leaders of social movement; the same people started emerging as poets and writers. They began projecting and discussing their own domestic problems publicly. But even for this discussion, they were forced to examine Hinduism critically. Such criticism was making its appearance again after centuries. This critical examination demanded reform, and from the point of view of psychological progress, these were steps taken in the right direction.

Women

Women became the subject of literature after centuries. They began appearing in literature in various forms: as a child-widow, a child-bride, a married girl (dwelling with and at the mercy of her in-laws), and many such forms of the woman who was being crushed by the joint Hindu family. The new science and technology, the new forms of occupation and business, new literary and intellectual ideas had, in fact, emboldened the writers to venture upon portraying the life of women.

Who is a Shudra?

Similarly, there was now no difficulty in portraying the Shudras and the Atishudras who, like women, had also been neglected so far. The rule of the Peshwas was no more. Moreover, a mighty empire was promoting liberalism with full vigour. Not only the State, but also the movements of social reform supported it. Unlike Shambuka, the new rulers were not ready to listen to the vicious complaints of the Brahmins against the writers or punish them for portraying women in their writings. The law in fact was on the side of the writers. Moreover, Brahmins had now acquired new professions and new offices, and as a result that class was divided; it was the first time in history that two factions of the Brahmins, viz. the reformists and the orthodox, were at loggerheads. It does not appear to be difficult for the Shudras, like women, to find a place in literature. Further, English novels had portrayed the lives of the weakest and the poorest, those who were in a state similar to that of the Shudras and the Atishudras. Despite such a congenial situation, why were the Shudras and the Atishudras denied a place in literature? Was it because writers were committed to the ideology of aestheticism or art for its own sake? Was it because they did not want enlightenment? Or, was it that the misery, sorrow, servitude and misfortune of the downtrodden lay much beyond the verbal ability of these writers?

It cannot be said that the writers lacked ability. They also wanted social reform as well as enlightenment. But they failed to take notice of the Shudras and the Atishudras. Their own cultural conditioning, their psyche and their mythology were the real stumbling blocks which did not allow them to portray the downtrodden.

Ideals

English writers were able to perceive the weak and the poor because Jesus Christ had perceived them. In spite of being the holiest son of God, he did not treat the weak and the poor as unholy or contemptible. He had accepted the concept of sin; but merit or retribution were not distributed on the basis of birth or caste. He had spread his arms to offer love and compassion to the poor. Jesus Christ, the son of God, embraced the weak and the poor. And it is for this reason that Christianity, Christian institutions and Christian society, as well as their intellectuals and writers, perceived them as their kin. It was Christ who gave these ideals, these mythical values to literature. Therefore, even the revolutionary movements originating in the feelings of love, compassion and anger, could find inspiration in Jesus Christ.

Blindness

Hindu writers could not perceive the Shudras and the Atishudras because Hindu heroes who had been accorded godhood and the sacred books which were supposedly of divine origin, had never taken notice of them. There were innumerable incarnations and saints, but they all failed to see the suffering of the Shudras, the Atishudras and women. If gods, saints and religion expressed contempt and enmity towards the weak and the poor, what place could the Shudras have in the mythology and the value structure internalised by the Hindus? Love, compassion and fraternity never had any place in the Hindu *varna* system, as a result of which the Shudras and the Atishudras had no place in Hindu society and literature; and therefore, nobody thought of ways of uplifting them. Nobody ever tried to be among them or aroused them for a struggle. To arouse them for a struggle was to destroy the intellectual and social system which promoted fatalism, rebirth and exploitation. That was of course impossible. And so all have promoted and propagated principles and mythical values which have originated in the needs of the *varna* system.

Had there been Buddhism!

Love and compassion would have acquired significance in the Indian tradition if Buddhism had remained a shaping force influencing the

psyche of the people. We would have had a multitude of schools, homes, hospitals and religious institutions serving the weak and the poor, like the Christian institutions. Various humanistic ideals would have emerged in society through these institutions. Moreover, anti-spiritualism, atheism, rationalism and a progressive attitude would have led to a continuous development of the sciences as well of the social means of production. The social structure is merely transformed with the development of the means of production; it is revolutionized with the transfer of ownership of those means. These are not simply social changes; they also motivate new research which brings about changes in the fields of science and technology. Buddhism has made an immense contribution to the fields of Indian medicine, chemistry, grammar, law, philosophy and art as well.

Buddhism is dynamic, progressive, revolutionary and atheistic. Unlike theism and spiritualism, it cannot be the protagonist of a static absolutism. Buddha's philosophy could have led society to democracy with the help of its basic principles. And when democracy is internalised to form a part of consciousness, the common man cannot remain untouchable, neglected or contemptible even if there is economic inequality and even though power is in the hands of the rich. The ordinary human being can be an object of thought. This had happened in Buddhism. That is the reason why the neglected sections of society have found a place in *Ther* and *Therigathas*. The point is that mythical values orient consciousness and also art and literature.

When modern literature was emerging in imitation of English literature, the essence of the ruling power had changed. The new philosophy, with the help of the new State power and the new knowledge emerging out of the new means of production, now had the ability to explain the notions of sinful and meritorious deeds, karma and sacredness, soul and birth; it could now demonstrate how untouchability originates in exploitation and enmity. Mahatma Phule in fact offered a wealth of such original reflections. The intelligentsia could have reached the notions of democracy and social reform with the help of this thought and work. This, however, did not happen, because the Indian intelligentsia have always been committed entirely to the established order and thought; our intellectual is, in fact, a product and protagonist of the establishment. One of the questions posed by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar clearly reveals the class roots of our intelligentsia; he has asked: 'With such a long tradition of knowledge, how is it that the Brahmins failed to produce a single Voltaire?'

To become a Voltaire, one has to stand up against oppressive religious and political authority. The Indian Brahmins and the intelligentsia could ill afford to do that, for they had created the entire system promoting religion, political power and exploitation for their own benefit. As writers belonged to the same *varna*, their writing obviously remained within the boundaries charted out by the *Manusmriti*.

National Enlightenment

At the time of the national enlightenment, there was an awakening of the castes which challenged the Hindu *varna* system. The Brahmins of course became the object of criticism; but as a matter of fact the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas were equally responsible for creating and sustaining an unjust system; the Brahmins had religious power while the Kshatriyas had the political power. The intelligentsia should in fact have provided leadership to the movements which were taking shape in the various castes. It is they who should have given those scattered movements a democratic orientation, transforming them into a larger revolutionary movement of national liberation on the basis of economic and political consciousness. But the intelligentsia, that is the Indian national leadership, divided the national liberation movement. They divided the enlightenment into two warring factions: a political movement and a social movement. They also declared those who organized social movements, those who theorized upon agriculture and industry, to be stooges of the British and to be traitors.

The national movement was turned into a form of historical, mythological movement and ancestor worship. In fact, there was hardly any reason for worshipping the past wars and their heroes. In the past, the common man or woman was a slave. The common man had little to do with that past. He had in fact been utterly downtrodden — as a bonded labourer who was exploited and crushed, being destroyed in civil wars and the menace of the marauding Pendharis. He acquired his own identity only in modern times. Owing to science, and due to his place in the process of production, his status was decisive and crucial. Democratic ideology and the numerical strength of the masses bestowed upon him the leadership of the struggle. In the past, only the so-called upper caste *varnas* and races had pride of

place; but the age of the machine and its science and technology, completely changed the balance of power. The superior ones were pushed down to an inferior position. Those who propounded inequality and did not wish society to be democratic, started eulogizing and sublimating history, mythology and ages gone by because, in those mythological and historical ages, they were the supreme victors and leaders. The intelligentsia now harked back to and worshipped the past because of this. People such as Phule, Agarkar, Gokhale and Ranade who talked about misery and servitude of the Shudras and the Atishudras, who criticized the *varna* system and demanded social, economic and political reconstruction, were declared enemies and were attacked from all sides. The intelligentsia won; they succeeded in turning the Indian liberation struggle into a lop-sided fight, and in reducing the other movements to a secondary status.

The reverse had happened in Europe. There, people had fought the oppressive religio-political authority in order to establish new thought, new research, new science and technology and new means of production. They embraced death and death penalties, but mass movements and the life of the masses progressed because of their sacrifice. Why this difference? The European intelligentsia do not pose as privileged and superior on the basis of a caste-system which bestows superiority on account of birth and religion. No special privilege has been accorded to them by their religion in acquiring either political power, social status or wealth. They can rise on the basis of their own abilities and achievements. The Indian intelligentsia, on the other hand, love the past; for their ancestor has been given the status of a hero, a god or a super-god. Because of the age of the machine and its science and technology, the present reveals the true value of this past status and it also privileges the labourer. The Indian intelligentsia do not wish to accept the present with its revolutionary potential.

The intellectuals here want the new science and technology with its means of production, as these help them achieve power and strength; but they wish to disown its revolutionary potential. They reject socialism, and wish to have the *varna* system, but do not mind reform. They would invoke the authority of the Vedic period in order to elevate a few, but would not accept anything like a total revolution which can eradicate distinctions of class, caste and *varna* and establish equality.

It is for this reason that these intellectuals resisted the struggles for social democracy which promised to develop into total revolutions. They isolated these struggles from the freedom struggle, and with a touch of orthodoxy successfully manipulated the latter to the advantage of their own class and caste.

Modern Indian literature written during the period of the freedom struggle is a product of this social situation and these thought processes.

When the struggle for national freedom was not allowed to develop into a struggle for social, political, economic and cultural reform, Dr Ambedkar launched his movement for social revolution and democracy. It was an inevitable expression of life itself. This movement was to meet with the same fate as the earlier social movements; like them it too was going to be isolated from the mainstream so that it would not become a national movement. Babasaheb knew this, and yet he launched the struggle; he was bound to, for he had actually experienced and lived the suffering. He became a huge conflagration. When sublime compassion and sublime wrath merge, a revolution is born, a new era begins.

Babasaheb began to speak out; he began his struggle; and many 'immortals' perished; those weak, downtrodden and unfortunate people who had never wept or fought before, hurled away the crushing loads on their heads and joined the struggle, crying, 'Where is the enemy?'

The enemy had, of course, pervaded Indianness in its entirety; in traditions and customs, in the structure and system, in the books, words and minds. The friends, on the other hand, were being defeated in the national movement. The Socialists and Communists tried to make the national movement labour-centred, but without any success. The movement was completely under the control of feudal and capitalist forces. All the revolutionaries, including figures such as Manavendranath Roy, fell by the wayside.

At this juncture, the Shudra and the Atishudra acquired, for the first time, heroic and sub-heroic status in Indian literature. They did not, however, express Ambedkarite thought; they could not have, for the nationalist movement had not rejected the *varna* system. The caste system pervaded the life of the entire society. The intelligentsia were committed to religion. The capitalist class could not lead the revolution, for it had close kinship with the feudal lords. Since the intellectuals belonged to the capitalist class, their mythical values,

thinking and psyche were subservient to the establishment. *Varna* and caste have a peculiar characteristic; they hinder class-consciousness even among the extremely poor and the extremely rich. Similarly, Hindu philosophical concepts such as fate also weaken class-consciousness. Hindu writers, therefore, find it difficult to cope with the Ambedkarite hero who is a rebel with a scientific and rationalist attitude; on the other hand, heroes like Karna and Ekalavya are consistent with the cultural and mythical value-structure which they have internalised.

Heroes such as Karna and Ekalavya are, as a matter of fact, reconciled to the *varna* system; they are courageous, but because they have been denied the place they deserved in the system, they view life only in terms of suffering; these heroes, because they have been rejected by religion, become simply toys in the hands of fate. Such heroes offer a lot of suffering, high drama, a good deal of conflict and intense aesthetic pleasure; they easily offer an opportunity to express a fatalistic ideology, which is nothing but taking refuge in religion in order to adjust to the demands of a class-society. Such a hero tries to persuade the reader to believe that life is nothing but suffering, and the reader is so persuaded. The portrayal of such a hero offers the reader the pleasure of revisiting his own experience. Such works of art manifest nothing but Hindu mythical values and consciousness. However modernist its appearance may be, literature which conforms to such ideals is reactionary.

Writers who have internalised the Hindu value-structure find it impossible to accept heroes, themes and thoughts derived from the philosophies of Phule and Ambedkar. They possess no ability to express such a life-form. Even the Marxist writers have preferred heroes who conform to the Hindu mythical values and consciousness. The hero modelled on the bases of the Phule-Ambedkar principles, as a matter of fact, rejects caste, religion and the economic and social systems based upon them, and spontaneously accepts democratic socialism. Being bitterly opposed to inequality, he naturally fights concepts such as divine personalities, incarnations, or superhuman beings, which originate from a social system based on inequality.

The philosophies of Phule and Ambedkar naturally lead to this perspective of democratic socialism. The kind of hero described above attracts Marxist writers; and yet it is true that they have failed to fully comprehend such a hero in the pre-independence period. This was not because these writers subscribed to the caste-system, it only

demonstrates how deeply entrenched are received value-structures and class boundaries. It is this reasoning that explains why writers who were progressive and socially committed started thinking about Dalit literature.

The history of Indian social reform is larger than the history of the freedom struggle. Freedom has materialized, but a large number of social problems still remain unsolved. The nation has adopted democracy and the Constitution has rejected untouchability, thereby invalidating a thousand-year-old religious and social structure. Yet, in spite of the fact that the Constitution has overridden Hinduism, untouchability and inequality still persist. This is not all; democracy and the *varna* system co-exist in India today; so do *Bheemsmriti* (the ideology of Dr Ambedkar) and *Manusmriti.* India lives two lives simultaneously, one in the twentieth century, another in the Middle Ages; it is riven into two forms of life, two social orders.

Why should the country and the countrymen find themselves in such a rift? How can democracy co-exist with caste divisions? It cannot, for they are mutually opposed. It is no healthy democracy that accommodates the *varna* system and the caste system. But in India they do co-exist which means that Indian democracy exists only in form; it is in fact a capitalist democracy. It is a capitalist democracy which accommodates economic as well as religious and racial inequality. There is no remorse at the fact that untouchability and casteism are able to destroy the life of the masses. The capitalist democracy makes laws only in order to postpone their implementation. It incurs no damage due to untouchability and the destruction of personalities caused by it. Moreover, Indian capitalism has not arisen out of any social need or development, nor out of any struggle for the ownership of the means of production; nor out of any historic battle fought on behalf of the new science and technology. Rather, the class which was specially privileged by religion to monopolize wealth and power, was able to buy machines, build and develop industries, and earned profit — using inherited wealth. In the age of machines, this class did not spontaneously provide any leadership to the age. If the proletariat is divided along the lines of caste and religion, it is difficult to launch a class war and establish a classless society.For this reason capitalism needs a society riven by religion.

Capitalism developed considerably after independence. It has developed the power to win minor battles. Social inequality, however,

has not been diminishing at the same speed; on the contrary, poverty and possession of wealth have both reached extremes.

Economic development through capitalism does not necessarily solve social problems. On the contrary, the development of capitalism gives rise to war, colonialism and Fascism, as can be seen from history. It is capitalism which has imposed the utmost number of wars on human life; wars fought to capture colonies and markets; and wars to suppress movements and philosophies antagonistic to its ideology. Thus, economic development motivated by profit does not necessarily solve social problems.

However, even social movements by themselves have not been able to solve the problems of untouchability. The problem still persists.

That is the reason why Dalit literature, while expressing its own social perceptions, also discusses problems such as: What should the nature of economics and politics be? What should the nature of authority be? It discusses these problems and the philosophical issues underlying them, because they are directly pertinent to the life Dalits live.

Why should literature undertake to develop such a comprehensive perspective? It is indeed necessary for Dalit literature. It is necessary for those writers who claim to be socially committed, for those who claim to represent Dalit life, to develop such a wide perspective.

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar is the mythic giant of Dalit literature. He is the ideal. He is the mythical norm, the embodiment of Dalit self-esteem. He is its supreme myth. He is the one who has given deep thought to all these problems; the one who launched agitations to bring them to light. In order to establish a model for Indian democracy, he re-established Buddhism, the philosophy of anti-spiritualism and atheism, the philosophy with a dynamic and humanistic perspective. He also argued for the nationalization of land, business and industry. He presented his thoughts on all the problems of life and launched agitations in their support.

Problems of the Dalit masses are also the problems of Dalit literature. This literature has integrated itself with the common people, with the Dalit masses. For this reason, it is opposed to the establishment, and is consequently leftist; and is thus capable of shaping the future of India.

Negation and Affirmation

Varna-based Hinduism is the largest religion of India. With the extinction of Buddhism, it is Hinduism that has remained the most important influence on Indian society and culture, i.e. on the psyche of the masses. A large majority of the Indian population follows Hinduism. Many concepts from the Vedas, Upanishads and other religious, semi-religious and mythological texts are accepted as truth, as facts; gods and demons in these texts are respectively worshipped and hated by a large number of Indians.

Hindus are in a majority in India. Therefore, the State machinery and the economic and cultural systems are totally under their control. Though the Indian Muslims maintain their separate identity in their religious rituals, worship and prayer, their psyche is essentially Hindu. Moreover, the concepts of the Supreme God, the soul, heaven and hell, and sinful and meritorious actions being accepted by all, the other religions in India are in fact akin to Hinduism. The Hindus and the non-Hindus share the same psychic orientation. As a result, their literatures are also the same, for the psychic and mythic value-structure of the Hindus dominates literature too.

Democratic socialism which is based on liberty, equality and fraternity is the philosophy of the modern age. And this philosophy has no roots in the Indian psychic and mythical value-structure. The literature of the saints has not provided any viable alternatives in the form of ideals. On the other hand, Fascism, *varna*-domination, hero-worship, pride, scorn, malice and hatred — all these have solid literary and intellectual support.

Democratic socialism, the new science and technology, and the revolutionary present, form the essence of Dalit literature. It therefore disowns the past traditions. The tradition and the mythic value-orientation of Dalit literature are to be found in the revolutionary world literature. Literature that makes the common man its hero and advocates Socialism is the model for Dalit literature.

Dalit Literature

A human being is not inherently Dalit, neglected or untouchable. It is the system that degrades him in this fashion. When the system is changed, the human being regains his human essence. Therefore,

literature that portrays the human being is, in fact, not Dalit literature at all. Even after realizing this, a major literary stream calls itself, in all seriousness, Dalit literature. The caste-ridden society and its literature have viewed the Dalit as someone who is mean, despicable, contemptible and sinful due to his deeds in his past life; he is seen as sorrowful in this life, poor, humiliated and without history, one whose ancestors could never hope to acquire respectability in either temples or scriptures. This, in fact, is the suffering, misery, servitude, humiliation, neglect and contempt of the Indian society as a whole, and Dalit literature carries the burden upon its head. Dalit literature has accepted 'Dalit-hood' (i.e. the status of the oppressed or the downtrodden), the way Buddha accepted suffering, or the way so many revolutionaries accepted the status of the oppressed. Daydreaming, and the establishment and portrayal of everything that belongs to it, may appear to be beautiful (due to the power attached to it, of course); but it cannot be forgotten that this establishment enslaved women and Shudras and condemned them to the status of untouchables. Dr Ambedkar was the essence of social revolution itself and embodied the mythical value-structure and ideal of the Dalits. It is not that he became the leader of the Dalits because he believed them to be Mahars, i.e. low-caste. He became their leader in order to eradicate suffering, untouchability and caste distinctions. It was not that he became a 'Dalit' because he did not respect the ideology based on the concepts of deeds or sins of past life which strengthened distinctions based on birth, caste, *varna* and class. He was a great revolutionary fighter and a great scholar, and yet he called himself an untouchable Dalit. It is for the same reason that writers — of today as well as of tomorrow — whose works have the potential to be placed in the tradition of great literature of the world, call themselves Dalit writers.

The established literature of India is Hindu literature. But it is Dalit literature which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. 'Dalit' is the name for total revolution; it is revolution incarnate.

Translated by Milind Malshe

RAOSAHEB KASBE

Some Issues Before Dalit Literature

While considering Dalit literature even eminent intellectuals, in an attempt to prove its distinctiveness, have been unable to avoid the temptation to define it. One may set aside the dispute whether literary creation precedes literary criticism, or whether it is the other way round; but the view that quantitywise the criticism of Dalit literature far surpasses its literary creation, though not wholly true, makes sense. Under the circumstances it seems inappropriate to define Dalit literature. The fact is, although Dalit literature is somewhat new on the Marathi literary scene, the collective mind of the people reflected in it represents the life of millions of Indians. This life has not suddenly come upon them, it has been imposed upon them for thousands of years; it has a tradition spread over centuries; it has a history spread over ages. And, therefore, it is expected that it need not appear new to any Indian. There is a touch of hypocrisy in saying, 'This is something new to us'. There is also shrewdness in pretending ignorance with a view to escaping the responsibility of providing a solution to this problem. And when this hypocrisy escapes the notice of honest people like us, who have borne the weight of age-old tradition, we engage in trying to prove how our life and literature is distinct from theirs.

Recently this trend is found to be on the increase. The question whether there is unmixed naivety behind this trend, or whether there is 'politics', has not yet been resolved. I feel that it is more important to create more Dalit literature than attempt to establish its distinctiveness. That is the real need of the hour.

That Dalit literature is not understood by critics who belong to other classes is false propaganda. Those who propagate this view desire to kill this literature by blacking it out. Critics who claim that they have understood it remain busy interpreting it in their own way. And those who maintain that it is distinct, play the role of escapists. In all these trends, I find one thing in common: it is the pain caused by Dalit literature and the resulting awareness of the sins of their

forbears. These critics are, therefore, busy striving to forget this pain and awareness. This is not to say that there have been none so far who have sincerely tried to understand this literature. The relationship of some critics — I need not mention them by name — with this movement makes this clear.

Once we accept the inalienable relationship between literature and life we are compelled to consider the art of literature as one which grows, occasionally disappears, dies and is capable of rejuvenation. And still what is assumed here is the continuance of the impulse to create. Hence I find it improper to define literature or otherwise explain it. For, to define literature is to strive to turn it into a 'science' And once we make a science of literature it is difficult to avoid making it mechanical. We thus find that a large portion of Sanskrit and Marathi literatures is pervaded by this mechanical element. I feel that when an artist gets caught in the technique of his art with a view to making his writing superior in the technical sense of the term, and thereby writes consciously, his creation proves harmful from the point of view of literary development. The question worth considering is, have the writers who have produced Dalit literature — both those who belong to the Dalit class and others — been able to avoid this mechanical element in their writings? Though the notes produced by Dalit writers and those by other writers sound different, in the final analysis they are the same. This is not to say that Dalit literature lacks variety. But whatever variety there is in it today is negligible.

I can clearly see that this analysis of mine is likely to lead to some misunderstanding. I wish to make only one point. Considering how seriously we take Dalit literature and dream of making it a vigorous stream in world literature, our efforts are inadequate. In the hands of our present generation are held the reins which can give direction to this literature. Any lapses on our part are going to prove us guilty in the eyes of succeeding generations. Then, perhaps, none from amongst us will be present to answer the charges; but we should always bear in mind that we cannot be absolved of the responsibility. Rather than loosen our serious hold on this movement, we should let the movement itself grow on all sides through continuous introspection.

That the writers and readers of Dalit literature from all over Maharashtra should gather here to discuss it is certainly noteworthy from the literary point of view; but it is also likely to influence in a big way the social, political and religious life of the Dalits. In fact this

is what is expected of it. On this occasion I wish to discuss some issues before Dalit writers rather than make an independent study of Dalit literature. I feel that the two most important issues before us are cultural conflict and, arising out of it, the problem of cultural assimilation. For, we assume that literature cannot be created in a vacuum. Besides, we accept the fact that literature has a reference to a variety of social contexts; and therefore literature is a social phenomenon. But we cannot stop here. What precisely are the literary problems before people belonging to countries that have no national culture whatsoever or countries whose people exist on different cultural levels? If we probed this question we would easily realize how vital the issues of cultural conflict and cultural assimilation are from the literary point of view. In the countries where thought and perception are uniform the philosophy of 'art for art's sake' makes no sense. When Leopold Senghor sees the origin of this in the dichotomy between art and life and says, 'The division between art and life out of which such a concept comes does not exist there,' he has before him the African society. Amongst us too this controversy had, for a time, rapidly spread. We have to trace its causes. Not that this philosophy did not get wide publicity; but we have to find out the root-causes for the emergence of Dalit literature. 'Art for art's sake' did not get much prominence, certainly not in the sense in which the dispute on Dalit literature did. This dispute was not sought to be resolved by removing the pleasure element from the 'art for art's sake' approach, and the didactic element from the 'art for life's sake' approach. The grave question which the Marathi reading public faces today is how to resolve the dispute over Dalit literature.

Following the emergence of Dalit literature we were introduced to the literature of the Blacks. It was Principal Waghmare and Dr Wankhade who painstakingly acquainted us with this literature through the periodical *Asmitadarsha*. Black literature began to influence our short stories and poetry and we began claiming relationship with the literature of the Blacks. This perturbed the critics. It is time for us to examine the relationship between Dalit literature and the literature of the Blacks.

We consider Buddha and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar as our inspiration. Some amongst us consider Marx's view of the resurrection of the neglected and the downtrodden as vital. Babasaheb has trained us from the start in the art of examining faiths. When we speak of the relationship between the literature of the Blacks and that of the Dalits,

we must understand the similarity and dissimilarity between the two. We ought to discuss it seriously and elaborately.

We have had a great many miseries to suffer. We have often brought them out into the open. They are also exposed through the literary medium. Every miserable man is in search of some remedy that would end his suffering. But even the use of desperate remedies fails to end all the sufferings. However, philosophers have succeeded in discovering the remedies to end man-made human suffering. Neither Buddha nor Jesus nor Marx has ever claimed that he could entirely free man from suffering. They have, however, promised to end the material sufferings that man has inflicted on man. The social, political and cultural miseries of the Indian Dalits are man-made and, therefore, they have plausible causes. We can also see clearly the way to end them.

African Blacks do not experience these miseries at all. However the experiences undergone by American and European Blacks are similar to ours. But they cannot be said to be wholly man-made. The origin of their miseries is in their heartfelt, inseparable connection with their own culture and the consequent conflict with the local culture. Is the conflict man-made? The answer cannot be found even in the tendencies which have given rise to the concept of class distinctions which considers some classes as 'lower' and others 'higher'. The suffering of the Blacks can be traced to their appearance which nature has made different from that of the local people.

We must understand that the Black suffering, though cultural like ours, is unlike ours in that it is not man-made. We cannot deny the possibility of our living a life of dignity in our own country by virtue of our own efforts. Many from amongst us who enjoy a high social status have secured it. Compared to our life in the first two decades of the twentieth century, today we are much better off. But we are yet to attain the life we have dreamt of. We are able enough to build our future. Babasaheb has placed our own political future within our reach by showing us the interrelationship between culture and politics. Whether or not we are able to bear this future successfully is not the point at issue.

This is not the case with the Blacks. The real issue for them is the problem of their 'individuality'. Some thinkers also say that if the Black became white his problems would disappear in no time. But is it in his hands? That it is not within his power is his real suffering. This suffering is going to last as long as there exists upon this earth

the white and the black. Men change, minds change and consequently the intensity of the problem becomes greater or lesser. It is an illusion to believe that this problem can be solved by modifying the concepts of superiority and inferiority between the white and the black colours.

The problem of Dalit literature, were it to remain limited to culture, would have been resolved. But cultural problems are never limited to culture; they are interrelated to politics. And politics is seen to become, day by day, all pervasive. Never will this problem get solved, for the rise of socialist revolutionary philosophy and the increasing attraction of the people towards democracy will result in the intensification of this process. Political selfishness tends to suppress problems, not solve them. It must be agreed that this problem has many aspects. This would be better understood if we compare the effect of this situation on the American Black literature with that on African literature.

At the Conference of Black African writers and artists held in Paris in 1956, Leopold Senghor, the world renowned Black poet, while speaking on writers and artists in West Africa, had presided over a fundamental discussion on the interrelationship between art and life, and had compared European art with the African. This discussion is worth reading in the original. It is also worth careful study.

In my view the problem before us is the problem of cultural assimilation. The nature of this problem for the American Blacks is quite different. Fortunately for us our country does not share a common culture. Because various alien cultures have influenced the multi-faceted culture of our land, its original character has gone to pieces. Hence the problem of assimilation that we face is not characteristic as it is in the case of the Blacks. Their problem has been stated thus: 'The relations demanded that the individual, torn from the context to which he owed his identity, should replace his habits and feelings, thinking and aiming by another set of habits which belonged to the strangers who dominated him.' Do we find Hindu culture and the values it has imposed on us, which we strongly oppose, as strange as the American Blacks find the American white culture? Whether the answer is in the negative or the affirmative, it has its limitations. The Hindu culture of today has evolved from the Indus valley culture and Vedic culture and has been frequently influenced and modified by alien cultures.

There is a mutual relationship between literary creation and experience, experience and culture, culture and politics. Politics has

the power to shape culture and bring about in it beneficial changes. Hence, though a writer may individually stand aloof from political activity to a certain extent, the literary movement cannot. We do not accept the entire Communist philosophy concerning literature; but when we accept their life-oriented approach to literature we cannot possibly stay aloof from politics as a means of bringing about social and cultural transformation. It is not our wish that what we write should be read only by the untouchables. Our writers strongly desire that it should be read by the 'touchables' as well. The major part of our literature is addressed to them. When Nimbalkar tells the 'inheritors of Manu' that the history of tomorrow belongs to us, when Daya Pawar expresses a desire that by fighting tradition 'we should overturn the soil as gravediggers do' or says to 'the gold-complexioned one', 'Hail, thou gold-complexioned one! Come just one step forward with the challenges of the times in your arms, these rocks of the Sahyadri have been forever longing for the union,' these poets desire, somewhere within themselves, to establish a dialogue with the so-called high-caste Hindus. Moreover, Tryambak Sapkale who says, 'Even if you wish to weep, do not weep before the blind and the deaf, for they have been, for a thousand years, under the spell of opium', or Namdeo Dhasal who, addressing the Communists, says, 'Beware! When you pass through our alley put out your torches', are in their own different ways striving to establish a dialogue. The same point can be brought out with reference to the writings of other Dalit writers. For this reason the present Dalit literary movement is a dialogue with the so-called high caste Hindus. Should we accept this view?

A similar question was asked in 1956 with reference to Europe, by Alioune Diop, a Black intellectual, at the conference of Black writers and artists. But it was opposed by the Blacks. And, therefore, the majority of Blacks are opposed to establishing a dialogue with Europe. We too must think it over and come to a firm decision. From the viewpoint of the literary creation of tomorrow this question is of immense importance.

In a seminar report published in the Diwali 1970 issue of *Asmitadarsha* I wrote that the original impulse behind literature has arisen from cultural conflict. Can this conflict be avoided? Or is it that literary creation has nothing to do with this conflict? We will have to answer these questions. No one person is supposed to answer them. There is an ever-growing trend amongst us of taking a hasty decision

or letting one person decide for the rest. It may help improve personal reputations but it is harmful to the movement. I am not opposed to cultural assimilation. But I also feel the necessity for cultural conflict up to a certain extent. Buddhist *bhikkus* themselves had started the process of assimilation. Assimilation is a kind of compromise. It is expected that this compromise will not necessitate compromise with values. From the literary point of view, although Ashwaghosha is accepted as the father of this process, we have before us the history of total defeat and of the tendency towards self-annihilation.

For this reason we should be overwatchful with regard to the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary processes frequently occurring in our social, political and cultural fields. A realistic picture of these processes must be reflected in our literature; we should also observe the changes in our life. We have produced the poetry of the 'sheep-fold', the poetry of the world beyond the hamlet and also of the red light area. It is true that we are being admired for it, but we are unable to express powerfully the continuous changes that take place within and outside the hamlet, the sheep-fold and the red light area. We have also to be aware that our frustrations, our pangs and our fervour are not uniform. We falter while trying to understand the flux of life and making a search for words which are meaningful. As for the short story writer, with the exception of Baburao Bagul there is none worth the name, though Yogiraj Waghmare has raised many expectations. Our reflective and critical writing has yet to appear in full strength. To say that our critics themselves will give direction to our literature and that they will do justice to it is different from what might happen in reality. Critics who formulate theories about literature cannot give direction to it. Someone has to point this out.

Some issues have been raised in the course of this article. For a time I have been thinking of raising one more issue. It refers to the accusation that Dalit literature does not go beyond caste boundaries and is not able enough to think of the masses. It is a fact that we do not find in Dalit literature class awareness as prominently as caste awareness. I agree that there are some exceptions; for instance, even in the first collection of poems by Namdeo Dhasal this class awareness exists in great intensity. What kind of situation is needed for class awareness to be reflected in literature is an independent issue. But from the point of view of a literary movement, it is necessary to widen the scope of literature to keep the movement alive. Black writers have made such an attempt. When the Black artist declares enmity with

the Whites he feels an affinity for races in lands other than those of the Whites. If I were to give an example I would mention James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's been Gone*. When the protagonist of this novel learns that the Second World War has ended, he sees gaiety all around. But the fact that it was the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which brought the war to an end remains ingrained in his mind. In fact during the Second World War the Germans were the real enemies of the Allies. But the bomb was dropped on the Japanese. The Black reaction to this event is worth noting. The writer says, 'They did not drop it on the Germans. The Germans are white. They dropped it on the Japanese. They dropped it on the yellow bellied Japs.'

Should we too widen the scope of our thinking that far? It may be that we do not have the required abilities; but we can start this process from the elementary stage. Just as we consider together, though up to a limit, Keshav Meshram, Daya Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal, Tryambak Sapkale or Surve and Nimbalkar, can we not examine together Grace (a poet of Dalit origin who avoids all socio-political references in his work and writes highly subjective, expressionistic-surrealistic poetry) and Dhasal or Grace and Pawar?

Translated by E.N. Manjrekar

R. G. JADHAV

Dalit Feelings and Aesthetic Detachment

The organizers of the conference on Dalit literature in 1976 at Nagpur have evinced a proper understanding of the development of literature by formulating a theme which combines social awareness and an aesthetic outlook. During the last decade, a many-sided, serious analysis of Dalit literature was made but it was not adequately supported by the actual creation of Dalit literature. The situation has improved since then. Dalit creative writing is slowly growing in substance and showing signs of yet more rapid development. The time therefore is ripe to raise issues in a concrete way about this literature. So, this seminar is being organized at the right time.

The seminar has made a categorical proposition but I don't think this should put any constraint on discussion. A proper analysis of Dalit literature may not be possible if we start with the prior assumption that social awareness and an aesthetic outlook are present in it in a natural way. Such assumptions are not helpful to the appreciation, understanding and evaluation of literature. They cannot enlighten and enrich literary taste. Raw and immature literary taste prevents the proper development of literary creation. This is true not only of Dalit literature but of literature as such. The assumptions have to be analysed. So, it is necessary to consider the quality and extent of social awareness reflected in Dalit literature and also to consider its aesthetic and formal aspects. Fortunately, this can be done on the basis of actual works. Till now, all consideration of Dalit literature was confined to theoretical discussion, arguments and claims. Now, a proper examination can be made and the credit goes to the organizers of the seminar.

The proposition implies a proper awareness of the fact that social content and aesthetic form are indivisible in any work of literature. In a literary discussion, first and foremost, the autonomy of a work of literature as a work of literature has to be granted. Even social awareness assumes significance when it is expressed in the proper

literary form. In literary criticism, though the content-oriented and form-oriented positions seem to be separate, in actual criticism, they go hand in hand, or at least they should. The social and formal aspects are blended in a work of literature. The blending is organic; where it is not so, both the purposes are defeated.

It is true that Dalit literature is prominently a literature of social awareness. The novels written by Haribhau Apte are novels of social awareness and content. The novels of Dr Ketkar are largely novels of sociological analysis. But such general statements do not advance criticism significantly. For that, it becomes necessary to enter into the formal aspects of literature, and into the mental attitude of the writer. It becomes necessary to study the works of art and know about the aesthetic form which social awareness achieves. Just as it is important to remember that Dalit literature has achieved its distinction as a separate entity mainly on the basis of its social content, it is equally important to bear in mind that this content takes a distinct form with the individual writer and with each of his separate works. Dalit literature has this double dimension and this aspect forms its special feature. The tradition of social awareness lends a quality of realism to Dalit literature.

Fortunately, the whole of Marathi literature has this quality. As such, Dalit literature has inherited the context of an established tradition. It is possible therefore to assess the worth of social awareness in the different streams of Dalit literature and the special distinction of each piece of Dalit writing in the light of the achievements of the whole of the Marathi literary tradition. It may be necessary for both these assessments to take into account the norms and criteria of the Marathi critical tradition. In both these respects established norms will have to be considered. It shall be the mission of Dalit writing to transcend established norms and standards and to create new ideals and norms emerging out of the characteristic social awareness present in Dalit literature. The success of the seminar will depend on the extent to which the consciousness of this task is impressed upon the minds of Dalit writers.

I shall prescribe for my consideration certain limitations so far as the seminar is concerned. I shall keep out the theme of social awareness in Dalit literature and concentrate on the aesthetic aspect alone, in the sense of aesthetic detachment. I shall further restrict my attention to those Dalit writers who have been born and brought up in Dalit communities. Anna Bhau Sathe, Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao

Bagul and Keshav Meshram as narrative writers and Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar and Chokha Kamble as poets, come to mind. Forms of literature which require greater detachment, such as drama and humour, are yet to be taken up by Dalit writers. It is with reference to such forms that aesthetic detachment can be properly considered. It may be that a detached Dalit sensibility is yet to form itself and that is why these forms have not appeared in Dalit literature. This fact can be interpreted in another way. Perhaps the Dalit writers, for certain reasons, fail to acquire the aesthetic detachment necessary to portray social feelings and relationships objectively. It is also possible that the form of drama can appear only in an atmosphere of social freedom and this kind of freedom is also congenial to humour. Perhaps these forms of literature are not as spontaneous as the narrative forms are. An advanced literary culture appears to be necessary for their successful expression. The Dalit writers have not secured the benefit of these favourable circumstances.

I think that from the point of view of Dalit aesthetics, the important thing is to achieve aesthetic distance by liberating oneself from extreme involvement in social awareness. It means that the Dalit writers have to realize their total sensibility towards life from the level of art. I know that this is easier said than done. In this connection, I remember the two short novels *Hakikat* and *Jatayu* written by Prof. Keshav Meshram. Out of these *Jatayu*, in my opinion, is more successful. I have been trying to seek the reason for this. At the outset, it appears as if the author is directly involved in the narrative of *Hakikat*. The story is told in the first person. The story of Abhiman Mangewar in *Jatayu* on the other hand is presented in a comparatively detached and objective manner. But this is merely a difference of degree; both these short novels are fine specimens of artistic detachment in Dalit literature.

This can be accounted for in many ways. What strikes me most is the literary personality of Prof. Meshram which is introspective and self-critical. This personality has been exposed to the influences of modernism. It shares the pains and privations of the Dalit community but is not involved in it. It continuously examines the right and the wrong of things and events. It reasons out to itself its own observations and experiences. It is its own speaker and listener. It does not address itself to any outside individual or group. It debates and argues only with itself. Such an introspective personality in a writer can naturally

maintain artistic detachment. This means that one aim of the aesthetic outlook in literature is to confine the experience of life to one's own sensibility and to realize its worth and meaning for oneself. The remarkable detachment which the writer maintains enables him to present in his *Hakikat* and *Jatayu*, the picture of Dalit life in a balanced, realistic and critical manner.

Can it be said that this deeply enriched personality was built up naturally? This is simply not possible. Such a personality is to be achieved through deliberate effort. This personality is not rich from birth as it has not received any specific social influences from birth. To achieve a personality like this, it is necessary to undertake critical examination of social consciousness and feelings. One has to acquire an objective attitude towards them. One has to absorb its meaningfulness through reflection and concentration. One does not interpret the form and literary worth of social consciousness by simply laying claim to it. All this leads to the fact that the vague 'feel' of social consciousness has to be coupled with critical understanding. This alone enables one to liberate oneself from the involvement of this 'feel'.

A different kind of aesthetic attitude is seen in Baburao Bagul's stories. Like the stories of C.T. Khanolkar, his stories form themselves through poetic insight. But they tend to become wild and uncontrollable when confronted with the ruthless, awesome reality. The reality which takes shape in his stories fills their external surface with such a thrilling and exciting plenitude of events that it doesn't allow his poetic insight to turn inward. In Khanolkar's stories, his poetic insight seeks every opportunity to turn inward because of his deep concern for the psychological and pathological elements in human existence. Bagul's stories become dramatic as they are embellished with poetic style and poetic comments. It is however felt that Bagul gets too involved with the dramatic content of his stories. Poetic insight has to be natural and spontaneous but it has also to be disciplined and developed. Mrs Shirish Pai has written a discerning preface to Bagul's collection of stories *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had Concealed my Caste). She states that his stories evoke joy and fear. The joy given by a good story and the fear generated by its content envelop the mind. But no story can make you introspect. Gruesome reality seen through a poetic vision creates something which should not limit itself only to the catharsis of fear and pity. It is desirable to transform poetic insight and gruesome reality into a wider creative form.

If Bagul agreed to restrain the poet in him, he would be able to penetrate deeper into this fearsome reality. The introductory portions of stories like *Mala Lokani Navhe Tar Manune Marle* (I was Killed not by the People but by Manu) and *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* reveal a restrained but deeper poetic insight. Manu also acquires a universality here and becomes the symbol of a mysterious but inevitable social destiny. This is also the case with his incomparable story, *'Sood'* (Revenge). In this story the awful nature of reality is illuminated by revolutionary and poetic insight. However it seems that generally the poet in Bagul gets involved in an unprecedented and fearsome reality. The way to resolve this problem is to make one's sensibility of life adequately objective and then to take it to the narrative form. In her preface Mrs Pai has made a significant suggestion. She wants Bagul to turn from the short story to the novel with its more extensive form.

Poetic insight has the ability to express deeper truths of life. Great literature is not made out of merely sensational and thrilling aspects of reality. It tries to bring out the abiding significance of things and events. This is the task of Dalit narrative writers endowed with poetic insight.

In narrative writing, the absence of poetic insight can be a virtue as well as blemish. *Asmitadarsha* publishes stories by young writers, many of which are highly sentimental. Revolt, protest, humiliation and defeat are the broad feelings and experiences presented in these stories. These stories are nearer the lyric form. This kind of social lyricism is, in a way, natural to young writers. The story of a fallen woman in Chokha Kamble's *'Pimpalpan'* (the Peepul Leaf) is a poetic story or a story-poem. It is necessary to see that all stories of fallen women do not take this form. Narrative literature should possess the eye of poetry but it should not lose its inner — penetrating and reflective — eye.

The problem of artistic detachment does not figure in Dalit poetry. The world of poetry is a world swayed and swept by emotional surges. The blind alley in which objective Marathi poetry finds itself today can be broken through by Dalit poets. The poems of J.V. Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar and Waman Nimbalkar tend to take a narrative turn. In Dalit poetry, the lives of Dalit individuals appear either in the direct narrative, in descriptive form or in an indirect way. Dalit poets face squarely the stories of social injustice and outrage that appear in newspapers and give them passionate poetic expression.

Dalit life is full of such incidents. It is involved in and afflicted by

these incidents day and night. Can the poets not realize them into well-knit story-poems? Chokha Kamble's *'Pimpalpan'* deserves special mention in this connection. In the preface to this poem, Durga Bhagwat has observed that the story-poem is an essential part of the Dalit tradition. The young poets can bear this out in the new context. Even in *'Pimpalpan'*, the Dalit in the poet frequently comes out with poetic and emotional comments. Narrative reality cannot speak out freely. Its objective does not get proper expression.

One important reason for this phenomenon is that the social consciousness in Dalit poetry is getting standardized. This poetry is becoming confined to provocative emotional outbursts. It is getting set into the usual moulds of revolt, helplessness and protest. In a way this is natural. But it has lent the music of repetitive social notes to Dalit poetry. The situation is no different in poetry written by non-Dalit poets. There is a disturbing conformity in the field of Marathi poetry. Poetic sensibility is taking the form of conditioned reflexes. The Dalit poets can find their way out of this stalemate with story-poems. Though Dalit feelings are broadly the same, they require distinction in their individual existence. Though emotional truths natural to and implied in poetry are much the same, the experiences on which these are based are different in each case. These experiences are hidden in a story form in different kinds of Dalit misery. So, if poetry turns from the abstract to the concrete forms of experience, it can develop through narrative description and the creation of atmosphere. The new emotional equivalences needed for this can develop, perhaps, through objective story-poems.

I may modestly state that this brief account of the aesthetic dimension of Dalit literature, seen from the point of view of artistic detachment, is presented with a sympathetic and impartial mind. I am aware that Dalit literature is deeply immersed in life's struggle. The actual Dalit world is filled with dreadful, terrible, humiliating events. Dalit writers cannot escape being tied physically and mentally to this world. Dalit writers are doing the difficult work of portraying this life, through personal experience and empathy, absorbing it from all sides in their sensibility. To live this life is painful enough; it can be equally painful to recreate it on the mental level. Dalit writers are deeply involved in this process. It is not easy for them to extricate themselves from it and write. The creation of literature has its own laws. Higher literary creation is possible only on the basis of these laws. Those who have the right to say that 'our humanity is our

burden' can easily master these rules of literary art. The gift of art can never be as heavy as the burden of humanity.

Translated by M.D. Hatkanagalekar

JANARDAN WAGHMARE

Black Literature and Dalit Literature

A comparative study of the Black and Dalit literatures will be, without doubt, highly instructive. And we shall have to attempt such a study by examining the kind of life the Blacks and the Dalits were subjected to in their respective countries. The Blacks are not originally American. People from different regions of Europe came to America and established their colonies there, in search of an independent and prosperous life. But the Black did not go to America in pursuit of freedom and wealth. He was forcibly taken there and America bestowed on him terrible slavery and colossal poverty. He had to abandon his language, his culture, his history and, in general, his entire African racial legacy. What remained with him was his African body and African mind. Over a period of time white blood entered his body and white culture took possession of his mind. His African umbilical cord was cut for all time by destiny. He was never able to reach African shores. Such Black leaders as Garvey made schemes to take him back to Africa but these did not materialize. Even the Whites thought of sending him back to Africa but did not succeed. However, it is beyond doubt that he has been nursing a curiosity, an attraction for Africa. He has tried to find an answer to the question, 'What is Africa to me?' Similarly it is undoubtedly true that Africa has given substance and meaning to his life. However, he has not remained wholly African. He has had to accept the language, culture and dress of the Whites, though he could not claim an equal share in their religion and culture.

He fell into the deep pit of inequality and was roasted alive. White society ostracized him. He was always made to do the dirty jobs. He couldn't live in the White locality. Though in a different sense from that of the Dalit situation, he had to live outside the city limits of the Whites. American culture alloted to him the bottom place in society and he could not raise himself from this place in spite of his desire to do so, nor could he change it. Black slavery has been characterized as

a peculiar institution.

On the other hand the Indian Dalit has not arrived from a foreign country. He is not racially different from the majority of Indians. It is not as if the language, religion, culture and history of others have been forced on him. In spite of all this, however, he has not held proprietary rights in this country, nor was he determined to be an 'owner' of the culture of this country. For centuries he could not get an equal share in the development and progress of his culture, religion and social life. Despite being an heir of this country he had not acquired legacy rights. Unlike the Black the question of leaving his country never confronted him. He is of this country but this country could never be his. So Ambedkar said, 'Gandhiji, I have no homeland.' He felt he took birth in this country for nothing. Baburao Bagul says,

> 'You who have made the mistake of being born in this country must now rectify it: either leave the country, or make war.'

However the Dalit could not leave this country. The problem facing him was: 'What is India to me?' He is engaged at the moment in discovering the meaning of this problem in his literature. Like the Black, he too has fallen deep into the pit of depression and has shed blood. He too had perforce to do low and dirty jobs for his 'superiors'. He was not given a place to live in the higher class Hindu locality. He lived on the outskirts of the village; his touch was said to be polluting and so was even his shadow. Indian culture placed him on the lowest rung of social life. For centuries he stayed there. In spite of the desire to do so, he could not leave that rung, nor could he change things. Untouchability, created by the caste and class structure, can only be described as a peculiar institution. The Dalit has been living for centuries as a prisoner of the darkness of untouchability. He has been burning for generations in the 'house of wax' of caste and class structure devised by Manu.

The American Black and the Indian Dalit are members of a 'closed' society in their respective countries. Both have been victims of a peculiar class structure; the Black of a racial type and the Dalit, of untouchability. Race is nature-made while caste is man-made. Blacks could not change the colour of their skin nor could the untouchables their caste. Man alone is responsible for this unholy distinction based

on colour and caste. At times a completely fair complexioned Black tries to conceal the fact that he is a Black. Similarly an untouchable may try to fraudulently hide his caste. The efforts of both have been total failures. There is no difference whatsoever between the position of the Blacks in America and that of the untouchables in India. And hence for a long period of time both were caught in the whirlpool of self-denigration and self-hatred. Both were kept behind the bars of fatalism. In order to perpetuate this imprisonment the Whites resorted to some myths and symbols from the Bible, and the high class Hindus, to the Vedas and the *Manusmriti*.

What could they do in this helpless condition? Leave it to God and tell Him their tale of woe and suffering? A Black slave says:

'In the Lord
In the Lord
My soul has found accord
In the Lord.'

In the final analysis, one's condition should be considered as the fruit of one's own actions. If the utter helplessness of life crosses the boundaries of endurance, then death, it is to be hoped, will be sent to emancipate us. Another such slave says:

'My Lord, He calls me.
He calls me by the thunder
The trumpet sounds within my soul.'

And if one is to protest against the life one is fated to live, that protest too is to be lodged with God. The Dalit registers his karma thus:

'Why do you not understand, O God
How crude in speech we have been made
We have spent our life eating leftovers
Should there be no shame in your minds?'

However, how can one give up faith in karma? Says Chokha Mahar:

'Whatever karma we have stored,
there is no remedy against it.
We shall endure what we have stored;
Nothing frees us from the fact written
on our foreheads.'

He tries to console himself by saying that he was born a Mahar as a consequence of his fate. But this does not fully satisfy his soul. A blues singer says:

'What did I do

To be so black
And blue?'

He doesn't find an answer to this question.

In the history of the world there is nothing to compare with the physical torture inflicted on the Blacks. The Whites tried to destroy their race. They were bought and sold. During the period of slavery the Black man did not even have the courage to assert his right over the Black woman and so his family system was devastated; even today he has not been able to rehabilitate his family life. After the cessation of the period of slavery, extremist White organizations like the Ku Klux Klan killed thousands of Blacks in public places, after humiliating them. The Blacks being landless and defenceless said goodbye to the South and moved North where millions of them had to live despicable lives in ghettoes. Even then they struggled and sought education. They fought for liberation and gave up fatalism. They became aggressive and today's Black has started saying confidently, 'Black is beautiful.'

The story of the untouchables in India is more or less the same. It is true that they are not subjected to physical torture like the Blacks. It is also true that they were not bought and sold in the open market like the Blacks. Their family system too has not been uprooted. However, they were subjected to a good deal of mental torture. They were not allowed to be educated. Today they are educated. They too have participated in the freedom struggle. They have turned aggressive and rebellious and for the last twenty-five years have been braving it out in the rural areas. Between 1966 and 1970, 1,100 untouchables have been killed. But today's Dalit youth has turned revolutionary. He has been imbued with new concepts; he is trying to discover his identity and is struggling to present it through the medium of literature.

These in short are the journeys of life of the American Blacks and the Indian Dalits — these are their experiences. The life of the Blacks is largely mirrored in their literature. Their writers have ably handled varied forms of literature. Their poetry, short story and novel now have an exuberance and maturity. They have also made some headway in prose writing. Their progress in the field of drama has been noticeable. The totality of their experience has been well reflected in their literature. Thus Black literature has left its footprints. It has come a long way. Black poetry was born in the latter half of the 19th century. It has been nurtured by two centuries of storm and rain. Black

folk literature is rich and has a long tradition. In the field of music, the Whites have not have been able to measure up to them. Black fiction has a history of more than a century. William Wales Proun's novel *Clotel or the President's Doctor* was published in 1853. Till the end of the 19th century the pace of Black literary creation was slow. It grew substantially in the years that followed.

During the period when the Blacks were unable to wield their pen, the Whites made an attempt to depict the life of the Blacks in their literature. Many times they did it in a perverted manner. Some were contemptuous in their portrayal while others were condescending. The novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made the whole of America shed tears. In the 20th century many writers ably handled the Black theme — among them Eugene O'Neil and William Faulkner are prominent.

In comparison, Dalit literature, as yet, has not travelled a good deal and so far their total experience has not entered their literature. Literature is the life-story of a society; the story of the Dalit society is yet untold in large measure. However, Dalit literature has been gaining momentum since the last 15 to 20 years. Their short stories and poems came into existence approximately 50 to 60 years ago. Their folk literature has not yet arrived, and it is still not known to what extent folk literature has been produced by them. In short, the artistic manifestation of Dalit life has not been made in an adequate measure.

White writers in America made an effort to portray Black life in their writings, but no such attempt has been made by high caste Hindu writers here, with a few exceptions. The untouchable has continued to remain neglected and ostracized in literature as in society. The untouchable is a 'rejected' man in Hindu society. This man has no place in Brahminical literature. In India a Eugene O'Neil or a William Faulkner is yet to be born to depict Dalit life. This fact causes the Dalit mind deep regret and so Waman Nimbalkar, addressing the Hindu Feudal Lords of Words, says:

'You have not taken as the theme of your verse, the crushed and withered life outside the village limits.' And he asks:

'How were your minds not tortured?
How did you fail to write songs about their tears?'

The high caste writers did not bother to look at Dalit life — even with blinkers. Addressing the great epic poet, Valmiki, who sings praises of Ramrajya, Daya Pawar says:

'O epic poet,

How can one call you epic?
If you had framed even one stanza
that hung out this injustice and repression
for all to see
I would have carved your name on my heart.'

Even a body like the Marathi Sahitya Parishad, which is so concerned about the future of literature, has not given enough thought to the portrayal of Dalit life. Many a time on the platform of the Marathi Literatary Conference non-literary issues have been discussed threadbare — but a discussion on why Dalit life has not figured in Marathi literature and how it could be brought in, has never taken place. No writer or literary body has taken cognizance of Dalit life, whether at the time of Phule's struggle or during the period of Shahu Maharaj or even during the lifetime of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. I think Dalit literature was mentioned for the first time in the Presidential Address of the Marathi Literary Conference in 1970. However, this conference did not think it necessary to take stock of it, though *Asmitadarsha* had already begun the discussion on Dalit literature in 1967.

Anna Bhau Sathe, N.R. Shende and Shankarrao Kharat are the pioneers of the Dalit short story and novel. These writers have done an excellent job of giving vent to the sorrows and pains of the Dalits in their creative works. Kharat and Sathe have ably handled the Dalit novel. The Dalit became a hero in the novel. The helplessness, agitation, anger and heartburning of Dalit life — all these have found expression in their writings. Sathe's novels *Fakira* and *Warnecha Wagh* (The Tigar of Warna) became known to all Marathi readers. Kharat came to be known by his two works *Manuskichi Haak* (The Call of Humanity) and *Balutedar* (The Holder of Land-right.)

Kisan Phagoji Bansod made the mute Dalit sorrow speak and sing in his poems over 60 years ago.

American Black literature made real progress only after the First World War. Before that, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Charles Chestnut and James Weldon Johnson made noteworthy contributions to poetry and novel. During the period 1920-30 various facets of the Blacks' artistic achievement were manifested. There was a wave of art and social education in Black life. During this period, a 'new Black' came to the forefront. On behalf of young writers, Langston Hughes, a poet and a novelist, presented the manifesto of Black literature thus:

'We younger Negro artists who create, now intend to express our

dark skinned selves without fear or shame. If White people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. Now we are beautiful.'

So far Black literature had been white-skinned. A white mind in a black body was being expressed in it. It was mild. Now Black writers began to portray their life in their characteristic language. They abandoned the idea of whitewashing their black skins and minds. In 1940, Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* was published. This novel on ghetto life in Chicago made Richard Wright America's Dostoevski. The rebellious Black hero of this novel gave a big jolt to American culture. In a real sense revolutionary Black literature begins with this novel. In 1952 came Ralph Elision's *Invisible Man*. This novel threw light on the darkness of three and a half centuries of Black life. From an artistic viewpoint this novel is highly powerful. During this period, James Baldwin too, fighting with destiny with his very vigorous pen, made readers aware of the blazing anger in Black life. In particular, the two novels *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *Another Country* made Baldwin a legend. The woman writer Lorraine Hansberry earned massive popularity in the field of drama with her play *A Raisin in the Sun*. The woman poet Gwendolyn Brooks got the Pultizer prize and now William Demby, John Williams, Melvin Kelly and Leroi Jones are in the forefront. The Black writer after 1960 has turned revolutionary.

The Marathi reader became truly acquainted with Dalit literature only in the last decade. Even the term 'Dalit literature' is recent. Dalit literature made its mark by carrying within it a new awareness of social revolution. It focused the reader's attention on Dalit life with Baburao Bagul's collection of short stories *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had Concealed my Caste). This collection is a landmark. With this Dalit literature adopted a new revolutionary stand and has vigorously begun its onward march in the given direction. Baburao Bagul's collection of short stories *Maran Svasta Hot Ahe* (Death is Becoming Cheaper) brought to light the hidden fires in the Dalit mind. He has forcefully portrayed Dalit life in the slums. Similarly the chief exponent of Dalit and exploited workers is Narayan Surve. His poetry has taught Dalit poets to use words like weapons. Narayan Surve's stance is also that of a rebel. But the philosophy behind it is that of social commitment.

The Black writers have taken about 40 to 50 years to adopt such a revolutionary stance. It was only after a long and arduous journey that

the Black writer has arrived here. But Dalit literature begins right from this revolutionary horizon. What is the secret? The secret lies in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's thoughts, leadership and liberation struggle for the untouchables. The reason will also be found in the era when the Dalit literatary movement began. Ambedkar gave the Marathi Dalit writer a new mind, this revolutionary era gave it a new mood and this began to find expression in short stories and poetry. *Asmitadarsha* was responsible for sharpening this awareness and making it more intense and fluid. I consider the birth of *Asmitadarsha* as the first watershed in the history of Dalit literature. Prof. Gangadhar Pantavane, the editor of *Asmitadarsha*, writes: 'The treasure of literature is not the property of a master. Experience which is pawned has no body here. The word-thief who wears the mask of social realism has no place here. In this business, pure and crystal clear truth will be amply found.' These words make clear the object of Dalit literature and also its direction.

Many doubts have been raised about the need for Dalit literature. Literature as such possesses no formal credo. The raison d'etre for and the direction of literature created by writers having experienced comprehensively a particular social life system have also to be explained. From this point of view the presidential speech at the Maharashtra Bouddha Literary Gathering at Mahad in 1971 deserves the status of the manifesto of Dalit literature. It says, 'Dalit literature is not the literature of those who advocate revenge. It is also not literature which spreads hatred. Dalit literature first and foremost advocates the significance of humanity and liberation and it is a historical necessity too. Hence it takes on a separate name and identity. What the Dalit writer and what someone in America writes is after all a poem. If this is true, why does Dalit literature assume this name? There are two reasons for this — one is to be found in your own self and the other is to be found in the Indian literature so far and in this country.'

Now a whole contingent of Dalit writers has been formed. Among them the more prominent are Keshav Meshram, Baburao Bagul, Gangadhar Pantavane, Narayan Surve, Daya Pawar, Haribhau Pagare, Waman Ingale, H.G. Bansode, Namdeo Dhasal, Waman Nimbalkar, Raja Dhale, F.M. Shinde, Sukhram Hivrale, Shantaram Hivrale, Yogiraj Waghmare and P.E. Sonkamble.

The similarity between Black literature and Dalit literature is as follows:

1. Both Black and Dalit writers are in search of their respective identities.
2. Experience in both literatures has surfaced from social life based on inequality.
3. The literature of both is life-oriented. Both Black and Dalit writers write from the awareness of social commitment.
4. The literary language of both is the language of cultural revolt.
5. In both literatures the aim is to find new cultural values.

Translated by P.S. Sabnis

M.N. WANKHADE

Friends, The Day of Irresponsible Writers is Over

Ladies and gentlemen, first of all I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to meet you, and also for honouring me by making me the president of this conference of Dalit writers. The thing I want to make clear is that I come before you as a lover of literature, a connoisseur and a student of literature. Please ignore my profession. So, it is as a lover of literature that I request you to hear what I have to say.

It was in this great city that Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar announced his decision to embrace Buddhism. Dalit literature is one expression of the radical revolt and intellectual ferment that began as a result of that revolutionary event. Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao Bagul and other writers received their impetus from this philosophical and intellectual awakening. And as a result of this unprecedented event, there was also a change in the content of the work of our folk poet Anna Bhau Sathe.

But that is not all. In Aurangabad, in the heart of Maharashtra, Babasaheb founded Milind College. Dalit students from all over Maharashtra began studying there. As a result, Aurangabad and Milind College in Nagsenvan became a centre of the Dalit movement.

In this centre a literary movement began to take shape. As, at this juncture, some detailed information is required about this movement, I will give its brief history. Earlier, I would not have liked to do so, but it is because of the present circumstances that I am speaking of it today.

Nearly 18 years had gone by since the founding of Milind College Educated and cultured Dalit youths had been struggling to give expression to their experience, their life, their suffering, to use the medium of the word to give shape to their experiences in the form of poetry and stories. But their writing was not being published because these artists and their themes were not a part of accepted society. Not being published is a matter of great pain and anguish for a writer. Writing is a force that cannot be contained. Just as a stream struggles

to cut through the rock to make its way to the plain, so does an artist struggle to reach his audience. Seeing these efforts of the Dalit artists and accepting the challenge of the situation, some colleagues and I decided to start a literary movement and a forum for Dalit writers in one of our cultural and educational centres. Another reason for this decision was that it is an injustice that simply because of a literary monopoly and mistaken ideas about literary form, a rich world of experience has never appeared in literature. We felt that this was not only an injustice to the writers who wanted to express themselves but to literature and society as well. So in 1967 we founded the Milind Literary Society and decided to start the journal, *Asmita*. R.G. Jadhav was the Managing Editor, Prof. Raymane, Prof. Pantavane, Waman Nimbalkar and Sukhram Hivrale were Assistant Editors, and I was the Chief Editor. A symposium on the direction of Dalit literature was presented in the December 1967 issue of *Asmita*. Many of those present here know that the symposium proved of help to many writers and poets.

Later because of government objection, the name *Asmita* had to be changed, and the journal was renamed *Asmitadarsha*. [The journal was renamed *Asmitadarsha* because there was already a magazine called *Asmita*.] I had to go to Bombay and with everyone's consent Prof. Pantavane was given the responsibility of editorship.

It is important to make clear that *Asmita*, *Asmitadarsha*, the Milind Literary Society and the Dalit literary movement did not come about because of any one individual, but because of a general movement, Ambedkar's ideals, and a widely recognized social need. It is important to say this because in our society egoism rapidly builds up and reaches destructive proportions. The growth of this destructive tendency is contrary to Buddhist teachings. Enough said. A second reason for considering Dalit literature independently is that after obtaining our independence we chose democracy as our way of life and mode of government. In those countries where democracy has taken root the society is homogeneous. Indian society, however, is deeply divided by caste and sub-caste. Where there is casteism, democracy cannot endure in a pure form. The foundation of democracy must be built on science and rationality. Since Indian society is based on reverence for traditional teachings it is beset by any number of superstitions, and thus there is a great danger that democracy will be destroyed. If this happens the Dalit populace will be forced back to its old way of life. So that this does not happen,

society must be transformed into a truly democratic society. It is important to take up this task. This is one reason for determinedly carrying forward the Dalit literary movement.

The task of creating a democratic society can be effectively accomplished only by the writer. It is the writer who is first aware of the internal currents in society. It is he who first understands and evaluates events in the life of society because he is the 'antenna' of society. As Auguste Comte and Taine have said, just as society affects the writer so does he affect society. So if he plays the part of Vishvamitra and turns a blind eye to society, is this not being traitorous to it? To write with social consciousness is not just the responsibility of a writer, it is his duty. As the famous writer Jean-Paul Sartre says about the social responsibility of the writer:

> 'Writing is not simply writing, it is an act, and in man's continual fight against evil, writing must be deliberately used as a weapon. It is necessary that he understands this.'
>
> (*What is Literature?*, 1950, p. 233)

If this is the case the question arises as to why a writer should have social commitment. To clarify this we must look briefly at Marathi literature. There we see clearly that upper-caste Marathi writers have avoided social commitment. Whether this was done intentionally or out of ignorance is a matter that could be studied separately.

Up to now in the history of our country there have been any number of political, economic, social and cultural movements. These movements have caused upheavals. But with a few commendable exceptions there has been no reflection of the movements in Marathi literature. On the contrary, there has been a great deal of romantic writing. This romantic literature misguides both the writer and the society. The reason for this is that the Marathi writer's understanding of life is restricted by his birth and upbringing in a particular caste and class and he is unable to come out of his own little pond. He has never seen that outside there is a vast world — a suffering, distressed, struggling, howling world, burning with anger from within like a prairie fire. For this reason Marathi literature up to now has been artificial and false, like a paper flower. As an example, let us take the much-talked of 'new literature'.

In this 'new literature' we have a Freudian picture of the aimless middle class. As for rural writers, instead of giving a realistic picture of village life they have romanticized it. Others have taken the aesthetic point of view, stressing form and style and have tried to show

the meanness of the individual and the meaninglessness of life. The main reason for this is that our writers have taken their inspiration more from foreign sources than Indian. They have imitated the meaninglessness and despair brought about in Western life by industrialization and mechanization. They have not realized that the problems in our social life have not come out of industrialization and mechanization.

Here we can see how meaningful are the Dalit writers' social consciousness and understanding of life. It is in this respect that there is a difference between Dalit writers and other writers. But the difference is not only in ideas but in experience, content, subject matter, style and language. The reason for this is that there is basically a great difference in the life and characters they are writing about. That is why they have thrown off the values, principles, purpose and aesthetic criteria of middle-class writers and critics.

In discussing Dalit writers the question arises: who is a Dalit? The word 'Dalit' does not refer only to Buddhists and backward class people but to all those who toil and are exploited and oppressed. This definition is in accordance with that given by Baburao Bagul in the Dalit literary conference at Mahad. He said, 'Dalit literature takes man as its centre. It participates in man's joys and sorrows and leads him to a just revolution. It teaches equality to the mass of humanity, that is, society. It considers man noble. Dalit literature does not spread hatred among men but love.'

Once man is considered the centre, it is the Dalit writer's duty to launch an intellectual attack on that society in which there is no equality, justice or brotherhood. That is what he does. He does what Walt Whitman, that singer of democracy, equality and community, has said of the poet in his introduction to his *Leaves of Grass:*

> 'He can make every word he speaks draw blood. Whatever stagnates in the flat of custom or obedience of legislation, he never stagnates. If he breathes into anything that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe.'

In the writings of Anna Bhau Sathe, Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, Keshav Meshram, Namdeo Dhasal, Waman Nimbalkar, J. V. Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Sukhram Hirvale, B.M. Parsavle, Pralhad Chendvankar, Yashwant Manohar, Tarachand Khandekar, Dr Bhau Lokhande, Avinash Dolas, Yogiraj Waghmare, Janardan Waghmare, Yogendra Meshram, P. I. Sonkamble, Gangadhar Pantavane and other Dalit writers we find expression of

the consciousness described by Walt Whitman. That is why G. B. Sardar in his presidential address at the Bombay Surburban Literary Conference and Yeshwantrao Chavan in his speech at the Marathi Literary Conference at Karad have praised Dalit writers. Let those who reject Dalit literature do so. As the saying goes, the old lady may cover up the rooster but she cannot prevent the sunrise.

There has been a good deal of talk recently about freedom of thought. This is a question that we must consider.

Can a writer completely free himself from his early upbringing and the limitations of caste and class and become truly independent in his thought? The writer is also a social being shaped by his training from early childhood and by his social and physical environment. Can the urban middle-class writer and the Dalit writer have the same ideas of intellectual freedom? Does intellectual freedom mean that Shankaracharya has the right to say that a social structure based on caste is the core of *dharma*? Does intellectual freedom mean giving freedom to those Fascist-minded people who support a decayed structure of moral values founded on religion? Thus freedom, whatever kind it may be, cannot be unlimited.

Perhaps primitive man was entirely free, but when he began to live in groups and when society developed, certain restrictions were placed on him for the welfare of the group. In this connection an essay by A.G. Gardiner comes to mind. After a certain country had won its freedom a woman went walking down the centre of the road in order to enjoy her freedom. When a traffic policeman stopped her she said, 'The country is free and so I have the freedom to walk anywhere and any way I like.'

But such unbridled freedom cannot be given to anyone. Just as there are inevitable limits to individual freedom, there are inevitable limits to intellectual freedom. Until now we have found that the exploiters and enemies of society have used freedom not as a duty but as the right to pursue their own selfish purposes. The establishment has compelled the writer to use his pen not to break the shackles of society but as a means of entertainment.

Today new breezes are blowing in the country. In order to reconstruct our society, to make our democracy people-centred, new economic programmes are being formulated. If intellectual freedom stands in the way of this social reconstruction, it must be curbed. In this regard I would like to ask you what relationship there is between the crores of our oppressed brethren whose future depends on the

reconstruction of society and those who go on talking about intellectual freedom without breathing a word about the freedom — intellectual or any other kind — of these oppressed brethren.

The self-centred teaching that *moksha* is to be obtained by oneself for oneself and the enervating philosophy that suffering is the result of one's actions in a previous birth are still prevalent in the country today. In fact, this philosophy is described as a great inheritance from our ancestors. In these circumstances talking about intellectual freedom is as inhuman and anti-social as playing the fiddle while Rome burnt.

Those who talk about intellectual freedom are the same ones who ignore the sufferings of the masses living in slums or in the untouchable quarters outside villages and towns. So the Dalit writer can never consider these slogan-mongering leaders as his own. For these defenders of intellectual freedom see only upper-caste people as thirsting for knowledge. They never think of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar studying day and night in the British Museum, living on bread and *papad*. In this connection I recall a poem by Mayakovsky,

'There are no fools today
to crowd, open-mouthed, round a 'maestro'
and await his pronouncement...
give us a new form of art —
an art that will pull the republic out of the mud.'

The pens of the Dalit writers are ready as levers to lift the people's democracy out of the mud of anarchy. Because in this mud the Dalits, only the Dalits, have been mired, half-dead, for centuries.

The other area where the question of intellectual freedom comes up is art for art's sake. The people who proclaim art for art's sake also live in an ivory tower. Like Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, all they can see of the outside world is the reflection in the mirror, of the image that comes through the window. Thus they substantiate Plato's claim that art is the imitation of an imitation. But when the Dalit writer descended into the world outside the window, in the form of reality, their artificial world of fantasy began to crumble. The more their hitherto secure throne was shaken by the philosophy of Dalit literature and the more they saw their ideas of beauty and their aesthetic principles begin crumbling, the louder they cried 'art for art's sake' and declared that socially conscious art is not art.

The idea of art for art's sake first developed out of Hegel's philosophy and later out of Croche's idea that art is autonomous. As a result

art was divorced from life. Beauty became the only aim; form and style became of paramount importance and content was thrown to the winds. The notion developed that the writer writes for himself. As a result there developed in the literary world small, mutual admiration circles of writers and poets who wrote for themselves. The writing that came out of these groups was chracterized by escapism, themes of sex and depravity and a sense of the meaninglessness of life.

Writing and people are mutually interdependent, but because of this self-imposed isolation there developed a great gulf between people and writing. The aestheticians and proponents of art for art's sake are responsible for this. The writing that has come forward to forge friendship and harmony between people and literature is Dalit writing.

Actually, beauty is a relative concept. I don't believe it is a constant or eternal truth. The concept of beauty is related to the thought of each particular age. At one time kings were the subject of literature, common people were not an acceptable subject. But today the life of untouchable quarters and slums has become subject matter for literature. To clarify the reason for this let me quote from Albert Camus:

> 'What characterizes our time, indeed, is the way the masses and their wretched condition have burst upon contemporary sensibilities. We know now that they exist, whereas we once had a tendency to forget them. And if we are more aware... it is because the masses have become stronger and keep people from forgetting them.'
>
> (*Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, Knopf, 1961; pp. 251-52)

This great characteristic of our age, I believe, should not be forgotten by those writers and critics committed to the doctrine of art for art's sake. The power of the masses described by Camus is there in the Dalit masses. The Dalit writer is committed to expressing this power.

Until now Dalit writers have created a world with different experiences and a different type of beauty. Through its different social content, subject matter, sentiments, style and language, new vistas have been opened in our spent Marathi literature. But life is tremendously vast. To express all its experiences the Dalit writer too will have to think deeply. If he does so, he will be able to widen the range of his experiences and his view of life.

He will have to become familiar with progressive writing in other

Indian languages, especially the Samantar literary movement in Hindi, and whatever other writing that attacks established values and displays a social consciousness. Secondly, there is a lack of philosophical writing in Dalit literature. It is extremely important to fill this lack. For this purpose Dalit writers should study those philosophical writers who have a proper view of life. Sartre, Camus, Malraux, Gunter Grass, Hermann Hesse, Norman Mailer — all these writers have thought about political questions and have dealt with them in their fiction. And they have boldly taken part in and given leadership to people's movements. It is also worth studying the writings and work of the leaders of the Black writers' movement — Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Leroi Jones and others. Buddhist teaching has laid great stress on knowledge. Every verse in Buddhist teaching urges man to think and meditate and read. In fact, the *Dhammapada* says that a little-read man is like an ox. His flesh increases but not his understanding. If we keep this in mind it becomes clear how necessary it is for those who aspire to the leadership of a total Dalit movement to devote themselves to study.

There is an intimate relationship between literature and myth, and because the Dalit writer has rejected non-Dalit literature, the absence of myths and tradition has created a vacuum in his writing. It is necessary to create new myths to fill this vacuum. Myths are a link between old and new literature and enable the new to merge easily with the stream of tradition.

What are myths? They are not legends or folk tales. A myth is a story of gods or god-like men or heroes told in terms that a primitive man can understand. Myths are the primitive man's attempt to depict in ritual the creation of the universe and man.

Myths are deeply rooted in literature, for they are an indivisible part of culture. Because of Frazer's anthropological work, *The Golden Bough*, interest in myth was revived and had a great effect on Western literature. Similarly, we find a re-evaluation of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* taking place in Marathi literature. The Dalit writers will have to find new heroes, their own Rama, Odysseus and Krishna. Before the Aryan invasion this land was inhabited by the Nagas. There was a fierce struggle between them and the Aryans. The defeated Nagas became slaves. From this cruel war the Dalit writer can find new heroes and heroines for his myths. Similarly, Buddha, his life and his disciples, as well as the *Jataka* stories, can provide material for new myths. Dalit writers should also read and study *Dalit Sahitya*

Purankatha (Myths for Dalit Literature) by that eminent critic of Dalit literature, R.G. Jadhav.

I also want to call your attention to 'the New Journalism', a popular new kind of writing that has recently developed in America.

In New Journalism the restrictions of the journalistic form have been done away with and political and social events and private conflicts are presented with fictional embellishment. The New Journalism began with Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood.* Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* and *A Fire on the Moon* are of the same genre.

I have suggested this literary form because Dalit writers might possibly find it a natural vehicle for expressing their heart-searing experiences. This form should enable them to present a well-developed picture and interpretation of many social problems.

Along with philosophical literature, I feel, there is a great social need for Dalit theatre. Because the stage, like publishing, is in the hands of the establishment, it is very difficult for Dalit dramatists to gain entrance. It is not enough to write a play; a whole-hearted effort must be made to produce it. Because it seems unlikely that this whole-hearted cooperation will be obtained, it will be necessary for us to make available a new field of Dalit drama.

Stories, poems and novels meet the needs of the educated. But drama can appeal to all levels of society at the same time. Considering the level of education in our society it is imperative that we give emphasis to drama. In Mahatma Phule's *Satyashodhak* movement and later at the beginning of our movement, *tamasha* artistes used folk theatre to bring about a great social awakening. In America, Black writers recognizing the power of drama to touch people at all levels, have formed their own drama societies and established a Black theatre. And in Black neighbourhoods and on street corners they have presented these plays using the idiom of the people. In considering drama, Dalit writers should keep in mind what the editor of *Black Drama Anthology* (Signet, 1971) said in his introduction:

> 'If a Black theater is to be born, sustain itself, and justify its own being, it must go home. Go home, psychically, mentally, aesthetically, and we think, physically.'

To awaken the illiterate Dalit masses we must go to the neighbourhoods and educate people through the medium of drama. Using their own idiom we must make them aware of their plight, their sufferings and their problems. I feel Dalit writers should use this medium on a large scale.

In this regard we come up against a fundamental question: ultimately, who are we writing for? For the establishment, to win their kudos, to win the right to sit in their conferences? For the 'Dalit Brahmins' who are slowly rising up from the masses? Or for whom?

This question is important, for once a writer understands who he is writing for he understands how to write. This consciousness will impart power to his words. I feel that without going after the recognition of the establishment, Dalit writers must write for the Dalit masses, for their awakening — for the Dalits, only for them.

But I feel I must warn you of one danger. Dalit writers must keep in mind the lesson of the story of the partridges and the hunter in the *Sammodman Jataka*. As long as the partridges were united the hunter could not capture them, but after they became divided because of their pride he could destroy them one by one. I beg you not to forget this story.

Friends, we are in a great struggle. You will not receive the gratifications, the praise, the pleasure in beauty that is theirs. But have no regrets on that account. Keep in mind the words of Camus:

> 'There is no peace for the artist other than what he finds in the heart of combat.'

Friends, the day of irresponsible writers is over, and we have the assurance of ourselves and of history that the Dalit writer is in the forefront of the battalions ushering in a new and revolutionary era of literature.

Translated by Maxine Berntsen

Glossary

aarati the waving of a lamp
abhishek the sprinkling of holy water on the deity
Ashwaghosha a great Buddhist poet and philosopher
bania grocer
barbaat a crudely prepared Dalit dish with more gravy and less meat
Bhadrapad the sixth month of the Hindu lunar calendar, which roughly corresponds with August or September
bhajan a devotional song
bhakri coarse, unleavened bread
bhamba rattle
bharud pithy religious discourse
Bheema one of the five Pandava brothers from the Mahabharata, known for his immense strength
bhikhu Buddhist ascetic
bibba a marking nut; the juice of this nut makes an indelible stain; it is used by washermen to put laundry marks on clothes.
bidi crude leaf-cigarette
Chamar an untouchable caste
chiwda spiced puffed rice
chulha hearth
cow's urine considered holy; used for 'purifying' 'polluted' things
dada the local bully; literally, 'elder brother'
darshan opportunity to see and be in the presence of a holy or venerated person or idol
Dhamma the right path as shown by the Buddha
dulli a big piece of meat
Ekalavya the son of a tribal chieftain, who wished to be the pupil of Drona, the teacher of Pandavas
Ghats a mountain-pass in western Maharashtra
gram sevak village worker
Hanuman the monkey-god from the Ramayana known for his devotion to Rama

Harijan Mahatma Gandhi's name for untouchables
hinsa violence
Jai Bheem a form of greeting used by the followers of Dr B.R. Ambedkar; 'Bheem' was Dr Ambedkar's first name.
jal tarang a musical instrument consisting of small bowls of water, struck to produce a note
jalebi a kind of sweetmeat
Jarasandha a mighty king, whose body, when torn in half, would join again. To kill him, Bheema tore him apart and threw the two halves of his body in opposite directions, so that they would not join again.
jat panchayat caste council
jogva the ritual collection of alms in the name of a deity
johar salutation from a Mahar to someone of a high caste
kacheri office
kaku aunt
kalagi-tura a form of folk theatre
Kaliyug in Hindu mythology, the fourth age of the world, known for its degeneracy; the present age
Karna a character in the Mahabharata; the elder, illegitimate brother of the five Pandavas, the heroes
kheema mincemeat
Kunti mother of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. Also the unwed mother of Karna
ladoo a kind of sweetmeat
lavni a kind of song, usually with erotic overtones, popular with rural and lower class urban audiences
Mahar an 'untouchable' community
maidan open grounds
malpua a kind of sweet pancake
mama maternal uncle
mamlatdar district magistrate
Marwari literally, man from Marwar in Rajasthan, but used to signify a money-lender, as many money-lenders in Maharashtra come from Marwar
murli traditionally, a woman offering her life to the service of god Khandoba; often amounting to an elevated form of prostitution
neem margosa
pallav the end of the sari
paan-supari a roll of betel leaf containing betel nut, offered to guests

panda priest
pandal cloth tent or marquee temporarily put up for functions
patil the village chief
Pendharis a class of marauders
pot slung round your neck, a the untouchables of earlier days had to move about with a pot around their necks to spit in so that their sputum did not 'pollute' the earth
puranas Hindu mythology
Ramoshis a lower caste
rangoli traditional decorative pattern made on floor with white, and often, coloured powders
Samantar an anti-establishment movement in Hindi literature, leaning to the left
Sangha order of Buddhist fraternity of monks and nuns
Sanyasi ascetic
sarpanch head of village panchayat or 'council of five elders'
Satyakam Jabali literally — 'desirer of the truth'; the son of a slave woman who, when asked his descent by the sage Jabal, answered truthfully — that he had no clan. The sage, impressed, gave him the name Satyakam and the use of his own name.
Shambhuka a tribal youth slain by Rama for having learnt the Vedas
shastras Hindu scriptures
shira sweet made from semolina
Shuparnakha sister of Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka
Sita wife of the god-king Rama, abducted by the demon-king Ravana and later rescued. Rama disowned her as her purity was doubted by his subjects; she sought shelter in the Dandaka forest
talati the village accountant
taluka sub-division of a district
tawa griddle
thali metal plate
thera a senior monk in the Buddhist order
Therigatha a Buddhist scripture
tulsi vrindavan small raised square earthen construction containing earth in which the basil plant is grown in the courtyards of Hindu homes. The plant is considered sacred and orthodox. Hindu housewives walk round it daily and say their prayers.
vatandari traditional duties assigned to an untouchable, such as keeping streets clean, maintenance of public property, etc.
Vishwamitra an ascetic

zunka a dish made of gram flour and onion, usually eaten with *bhakri* (see above)

zuting a very powerful spirit

Arjun Dangle, born in Bombay in 1946, holds an M.A. from Bombay University, and is an important name in the politics and literature of Maharashtra.

A founder member of the militant Dalit youth organization, the Dalit Panthers, he is at present the president of the State Unit of the Bharatiya Republican Party of India.

Dangle's collection of poems, *Chhavani Halte Ahe*, won the Maharashtra State Award in 1978. He has also published a collection of short stories, *Hi Bandhavarchi Manse*, and his *Dalit Sahitya — Ek Abhyas*, a critical work, is a standard reference book in many universities of Maharashtra. He has recently published *Dalit Vidrohi*, a collection of essays on politics and literature. Many of his poems and short stories have been translated into various Indian and foreign languages.

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